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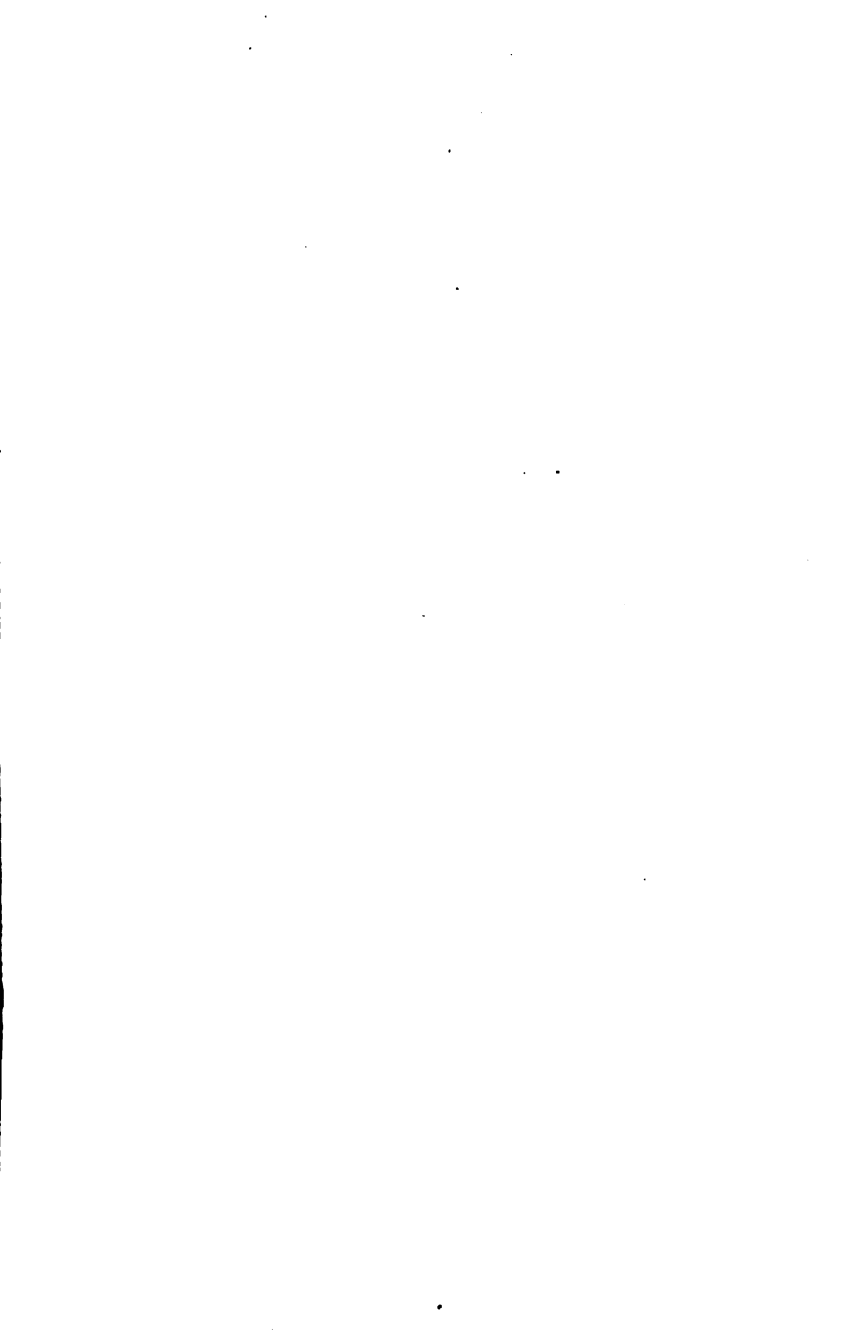
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THE HIDDEN PICTURE.

A *Nobel*.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

BY

CARRICK F. BRODIE.

There are more things in heaven and earth, than our philosophy
dreams of.

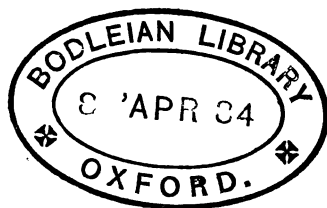
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CHAPTER I.

A BEAUTIFUL summer's evening, in Naples. Yet scarcely evening, rather late afternoon, when the shadows begin to lengthen, and the air grows cool, and the tree tops, rustling, wave gently, and the sky overhead is clear as crystal, and on the horizon a sort of bloom, such as fables tell us surrounds the Immortal Regions, and beyond, therefore, must be Fairyland or Paradise.

A long, dusty road, leading from the bay to the town, with at present but few passengers upon it, though by-and-bye it will be crowded, when the power of the sun is thoroughly gone, and the Lazzaroni are fully awake, and business which languished through the intense heat of the day revives again, and the beauty and fashion of Naples come out to admire and be admired, in the gay streets, and public walks, and by the cool water.

Of the few figures which at present toiled through the dust and glare of the high road, the most remarkable was a peasant girl, in the conventional red petticoat, and flat white head-dress, so often imitated by young English ladies at fancy balls. The vivid spot of colouring which she formed on the white road was in itself sufficient to

attract the notice of a passer-by; besides which, this girl was evidently in gala costume. The rich dye of her petticoat showed it to be the finest of fine wool, her velvet bodice, black and glossy, was evidently of silk; her chemisette, snowy white, and fine as muslin; her earrings, cross, necklace, and shoe buckles, of elaborately chased silver.

All this formed a bright *tout ensemble*, which could be taken in at a glance; another would show feet and ankles of perfect symmetry, and hands so white and small, and terminating in such lovely tapering fingers, that the marvel was, how they contrived to do any of the work necessary to a much higher class even than that to which she apparently belonged.

But the next glance which would quickly be directed to the face belonging to these fairly formed extremities, would make the beholder forget all the rest. That face can only be described by calling it *wonderfully beautiful*. Slightly oval, creamy coloured, with a faint crimson glow on the cheeks, lips of deep dewy rose, of that perfect shape so seldom seen except in sculpture; hair of glossy black, braided over a low forehead, smooth as marble, and eyes—but now I must consider; what description could do them justice? They were not the ordinary Italian eyes, black or brown, neither were

they any shade of blue or grey ; indeed, if a colour could be defined for them at all it would be green, but gifted with such sweeping black lashes, and varying so with every light or shade, that, chameleon-like, they were never the same for two minutes together ; yet always large, lustrous, and full of a wistful melancholy, as if the soul which looked through them had sorrows and longings of its own, the burden of which the body dimly felt without understanding the cause.

She walked firmly yet lightly, and with a sort of imperial grace, more to be expected from some damsel boasting the blue blood of Andalusia than a Campagna peasant girl, whose country lay crushed and writhing under the iron heel of France, for at the time I speak of, Joseph Buonaparte sat on the throne of Naples, the royal family was in exile, the nobles full of rage and bitterness, either secretly plotting or openly rebellious, the middle classes over-awed and bewildered, yet ready and waiting for any chance of throwing off the hated foreign yoke ; and the peasantry, brave and loyal—helpless, and subject to all the exactions, insults and miseries, to be expected from a usurping government and insolent soldiery.

Such thoughts as these might have occupied the mind of the fair peasant who paced hurriedly along the dusty road, for

she was evidently ill at ease, anxious, dejected, and fearful, in no small degree.

She started at every unusual sound, and gasped and shivered when a turn in the road brought her in sight of a French cavalry regiment exercising in an open space on one side. Yet in spite of her evident terror she lingered, and cast furtive but searching glances over the glittering ranks. Then pulling her head-dress forward till her face was almost concealed, she hastened on and neither stopped nor turned till she entered the city.

Here though encountering hundreds, she was less liable to scrutiny than on the deserted road, for many other brilliant costumes, and fair faces, flashed up and down the broad pavement, or flitted in and out of the gay shops, for though Naples was enslaved, her beautiful daughters did not forget that they had an empire of their own to maintain, and the merchants felt that though their ancient and honourable customers were perhaps dying of starvation in some Calabrian forest, yet that was no reason that they should not themselves eat, drink, buy and sell, and get as much profit out of their foreign oppressors as they possibly could.

The peasant narrowly watched the by-streets as she passed, and gave a sigh of relief as she at last came upon one entitled,

“Stradoa San Francesco.” Down this she turned, quickening her pace to a run as she neared the end, and fixed her eyes upon a small door in an opposite wall. She looked cautiously round—no one was near. She tried the latch, it rose at once, and she slipped in, carefully closing the door behind her.

She was standing on the top step of a short flight, leading down to a large garden, with rows of orange and pomegranate trees on either side, and between them a straight paved walk terminating in a large and once handsome house, now almost in ruins, broken windows, fallen chimneys, dilapidated doors, rubbish, dust, and desolation everywhere. She walked up and tapped with her knuckles at what seemed to be the principal entrance, and after repeating this two or three times a sharp voice from some region above called out—

“Who knocks?”

“Is Father Francesco in?” asked the girl.

“I know none such,” said the sharp voice.

“What is your business?”

“I wish to see Father Francesco.”

“Cospetto! Have I not told you that I don’t know him?”

“You *do* know him,” replied the girl, firmly; “he is here, and I must see him, and I shall not go away till I *have* seen him, and you had better tell him so at once.”

“Ho, ho,” laughed the Cerberus from above, “you are a bold damsel, I must have a look at you.” And then heavy footsteps descended the stairs, the door was opened and a withered female face looked out. The owner of the face seemed unprepared for the picture which met her gaze, for her voice became more civil as she said—“Well, pretty maiden, if you will tell me what particular sin you wish to do penance for, perhaps I may direct you to a confessor.”

The peasant seemed no way disturbed by this cool remark, but placing her finger for a moment on her lips, said in a whisper—

“Tell Father Francesco—Castello.”

The old woman started with a look of astonishment that was almost terror, and without another word hobbled up the stairs at a much quicker rate than she had descended them. In a few seconds she reappeared, and leaning over the balustrade, beckoned her visitor to come up. Then pointing to an open door, in a low voice she bade her enter.

In the room stood an elderly man in the ordinary dress of a Jesuit priest. He was looking towards the door, anxious curiosity in his face, which changed to bewildered amazement as the peasant girl became visible. He threw up his arms with a gesture of astonishment, exclaiming—

“Nina—daughter—Holy Virgin ! what has happened ?”

The girl knelt down before him, kissed his hand, and attempted to speak ; but overcome, perhaps with fatigue and fright, perhaps with some hidden anxiety, burst into passionate tears.

The Priest softly stroked her head, and, turning to the old woman, said —

“Go down, Ursula, get some refreshment ready for this poor child ; and remember—admit no one.”

As soon as she left the room, and had closed the door behind her, he spoke —

“Dear daughter, be calm. Whatever has happened you are safe now.”

In a little while her sobs subsided, and then the Priest spoke again.

“Child, I am all amazement—where is Margherita ? She should not have let you enter here alone. She is gone, I suppose, to make purchases ?”

Nina stood up, dried her tears, and spoke softly, but with vehement rapidity.

“Father, I have terrible things to tell. Margherita”—she paused and shuddered—“I dare not *think* even where she may be—I am choking with grief and terror ; listen. Yesterday I wandered farther than usual, and got bewildered among the rocky roads on the other side of the bay. I was, conse-

quently, late, and hurried a good deal, when at last I found the right path home. Suddenly I heard a shout, and saw a party of French soldiers coming down a sloping path which led from the mountain. I did not like the look of them, and walked faster. They shouted again, and as I was now near home I began to run. They ran also ; I was terrified, and flew like the wind. They pursued, and had the distance been greater must have overtaken me. I neared the cottage.

“Margherita was spinning at the door ; she saw with a glance how it was. She jumped up—caught me as I almost fell on the threshold—pushed me inside—shut the door, and placed her back against it. The Frenchmen came up, and tried to coax her to let them in. She never answered. Then they threatened ; still she remained silent. At last one of them tried to pull her away ; she blazed with fury—struck him with her distaff, and poured out such a torrent of abuse that it is well they did not understand the half of what she said. But they *did* understand when she called them ‘poor, pitiful French cowards, fit only to war with women ;’ and their looks grew black, and their eyes flashed, and some of them drew their bayonets, and it would have gone ill, I fear, with poor Margherita, but a party of fishermen coming up from the bay just

then passed, and to them Margherita called for help. They were only too glad to come, and though equal in numbers to the Frenchmen and all armed, yet I never expected that the latter would move off as they did—quietly, but scowling and muttering threats of vengeance.

“All this I saw from the side window, and when they were fairly gone, Margherita came in triumphant, highly elated with her victory. She fancied there had been some order given to prevent the fights between the French and our people, which have been so continual of late, and they did not dare to make a disturbance. She sent me to bed early, but I could not rest, so rose again, and sat by the window watching the lovely moonlight and the flickering flames from Vesuvius.

“At last I grew drowsy, and, still sitting at the window, fell asleep. I woke with a confused idea of sound, sat up in my chair and listened, and distinctly heard voices below speaking in French. Cautiously I looked out—there was a group of men gathered round the door, all in dark clothing, but by the bright moonlight I at once recognised some of my persecutors. They were armed with clubs, and one or two carried small torches.

“In a moment I divined their purpose. Hastily and silently I put on my clothes,

and flew to Margherita's room and woke her, and told her what I had seen. She comprehended in three words. We crept out by the back entrance, ran across the court and she concealed me in the little cave behind the well where my dearest father lay those three dreadful days. I whispered —

“ ‘What will you do?’ ”

“ She said —

“ ‘No fear for me,’ and laughed.

“ I lay there—it seemed for ages. I heard dim, distant sounds, but could distinguish nothing. At length through a chink in the rock I saw daylight. I still lay quiet for an immense length of time. At last, finding that Margherita did not come, and feeling sure that the morning was advanced, I ventured out. I crossed the Court, looking and listening on all sides, but heard and saw nothing. I entered the house—it was empty, and in confusion. The door was broken in, but propped up so that a passer-by would not notice anything.

“ I called Margherita—no answer. I searched everywhere in vain. Not an article had been taken, though every cupboard and drawer had been ransacked; either the robbers had been disturbed, or did not care for plunder. I waited till past midday—no Margherita. I found food in the house, and ate a little, but with a sinking heart.

“ As the time went on I grew desperate.

I did not dare make enquiries from the neighbouring cottages, for, as you know, Father, I feared the questions that might be asked. When the day began to turn and still no Margherita, I lost all hope. I knew if she were alive and able to move that she would have come to me, and I began to reflect that if darkness set in, and I was still alone, I should go mad with terror, and then I thought—could I make my way to you. I knew the direction well—I had heard it from Margherita a thousand times. I put on my gala-dress, thinking as it was Saints' Day I might pass unnoticed in the crowd—made one more anxious search into every nook and corner—concealed everything of value in the vault—stood for half an hour trembling and hesitating by the door—and finally took courage—set off—and terrified, but determined, found my way here at last.

“Dear Father, what is to be done? Where can Margherita be? Where shall I go? What shall I do? I trust to you for everything.”

During this account the Priest had never spoken, but the expression of his face was equal to the most forcible language. When she had finished he still remained a few minutes silent, arguing apparently with his own thoughts, for gradually a look, at first stern, and darkening into an expression almost demoniacal, stole over his features.

This again died out, and raising his clasped hands he solemnly exclaimed —

“How long, O Lord, how long shall the weeping and bleeding earth call to Thee in vain? Surely the day of vengeance is at hand!” Then turning to Nina, who stood looking anxiously into his eyes, he resumed his usual quiet voice and manner —

“Dear child, you have done very rightly in coming to me. I am equally amazed and gratified at the courage and energy you have shown; but I fear I shall have—most unwillingly—to tax those qualities still farther. My first thought must be to place you in safety; to remain here even for an hour would expose you to the chance of sudden and inevitable danger. I have already thought of a sure refuge, but I cannot accompany you thither myself, for without long and careful preparation I should infallibly be recognised, and though,” he added with a bitter smile, “I care little for my own paltry life, there are others—more important—who, did I perish, must perish with me, and on that account also I dare not stir from here till I receive a certain summons which I am even at this moment awaiting. Neither can I send Ursula with you—in the first place she would be no protection, and besides she must remain here to answer enquiries; so, dear daughter, you must again summon all your courage and traverse the Toledo alone.”

"What! this evening, Father?" said Nina with a sinking heart and a glance at the windows, where the light was every moment growing less.

"This evening, child, and at once, as soon as you have taken food and wine. But have no fear. The direction I shall give you cannot miss, and in the disguise which I shall provide, you may even yet pass through this lawless and unhappy city unmolested. I send you, too, among friends. You remember Giacomo Capri?"

"Well," answered Nina earnestly, "he is the kindest and best of men. But," she added with some hesitation, "surely I cannot go to him?"

"Certainly not," answered the Priest gravely, "but to his parents you can; Maestro Capri, the famous goldsmith, is the wealthiest man, and consequently one of the most influential in Naples, and a staunch though secret supporter of our cause. Giacomo Capri, his only son, some years ago, as you have doubtless heard—delighting in a soldier's life, and stimulated by ambition, and admiration of the great French champion, took service with him, and attained distinctions which few even of their own nation can boast. But when the champion became in his turn the oppressor, Giacomo would serve him no longer, and retired in disgust from the profession he had

chosen. Still his early habits and natural inclinations lead him to follow that line of life, and abhorring idleness, he has consented to become governor of a State prison, where his great abilities and integrity make him invaluable to the Government, while his kindness and sympathy are a perfect boon to the prisoners. This position too, places him and his family above all suspicion, and nowhere could you remain in such perfect security as in his father's house. I know, too, that the Signora Capri was expecting a niece from the Campagna to visit her, and that visit is suddenly put an end to by the marriage of a sister. You will personate her, and there all prying curiosity will cease. So, dear child, be without fear. I will write an explanation to Maestro Capri of your appearance there, and of other matters important for him to know. This you will yourself deliver. Never imagine yourself to be a burden, however long you might remain with them, for the goldsmith has jewels in keeping for your father, the smallest of which would defray your maintenance for years, and besides, for reasons which I cannot now enter into, it will indeed be a proud and happy day when a daughter of your house crosses the threshold of the Capri, a loved and honoured guest. Meantime I will do everything necessary to discover Margherita, alive

or dead—would that I could add—and bring the aggressors to justice, but alas! what little justice is left in this miserable world is beyond our reach—outlawed and fugitive as we are! But the time will come—it will come”—and as he pronounced the last words, his eyes took a dreamy expression, and the hand which lay on Nina's shoulder was withdrawn, and he walked to the window and gazed fixedly at the glowing western sky, apparently forgetful of the matters which had been so full of interest a moment before.

He was roused from this reverie by a tap at the door, and Ursula entered with wine, fruit and bread, which she placed on the table.

“That is right,” said the Priest, resuming his former energy, “you must eat child, and then again to your journey.”

He poured out some wine and held it towards her. She put it aside.

“I cannot,” she said; “bread would choke me, and without it the wine would only heat and bewilder my head.”

“You must do what I tell you,” he replied firmly. “Remember it is absolutely necessary that you should feel neither weakness nor fear till you have reached your refuge—then—as you will. You will be guarded from the very air, lest it touch you too roughly. Therefore, now eat and drink;

should you faint or fail by the way—but that must never be”—and he waved his hand in the air as if to drive away some horrible object. “Take this, child,” and again he held the wine towards her, and Nina, accustomed to implicit obedience, did not dare refuse. “I will now go to prepare your disguise,” he said, and left the room.

While alone she contrived to finish the unwelcome food, and, notwithstanding her disinclination, felt that it revived both body and mind.

In a short time the Priest returned carrying a small bundle.

“I am going,” he said, smiling almost gaily, “to make you test your own disguise. I feel sure that the result will encourage you in your lonely walk this evening.”

While speaking he slipped a bandage over her eyes. She then felt him remove her head-dress, and in some way alter the arrangement of her hair. Then some garment was placed over her own costume, and her head and neck enveloped in it. After a few more manipulations, he took her hand and led her a little way till she felt a cooler atmosphere. Then he removed the bandage. She was standing in a room open on three sides, the roof supported on columns.

The first object she noticed was a pale young Carmelite monk gazing at her with intense curiosity, and it was only by the

start she and the monk simultaneously gave that she discovered him to be the reflection of her own figure in an enormous looking-glass which covered one side of the wall.

The Priest watched her with satisfaction.

"Do you think," he said, "that there is any chance of a stranger penetrating that domino when you cannot even recognize yourself?"

"I could not have believed it," she answered. "I should pass myself in the street, if that were possible. Indeed, Father, I feel no fear now—I am ready to go at once."

"That is well," he said approvingly; "but you are not thoroughly equipped yet. See here"—he held up a small quaintly-ornamented dagger—"this is for use, not ornament"—he fastened it securely into her girdle, and placed the folds of her dress over it; "but remember, it is to be used only in the last extremity. I will now write a short explanation to Maestro Capri, for you to convey to him, and then, dear daughter, there is one more duty before we part." He placed his two hands on her shoulders and looked steadily into her face. "It is long, long since you confessed, and it may be—ah! it may be—long, long before I listen to your young voice again. Make confession now, my daughter, short but full, that I

may send you from me with the warmest blessing ever bestowed by priest or parent."

Nina's pale face grew paler still, and she moved restlessly under the Priest's searching eye.

"Surely not to-night, Father—see how late it is? How shall I find my way through the streets in the dark? And I have been so bewildered and terrified that I cannot collect my thoughts—it will take so long, and I can think of nothing but getting into safety; another time will be better."

"Hush!" said the Priest, holding up his hand with grave warning, "what do we know of another time? For myself," he added, with a patient melancholy in his voice, "I know that my work is nearly done, and I cannot tell from hour to hour that the next stroke of the clock may not summon me to render up my account. Be it so! I am ready! I have done little—nothing; but I have tried to be faithful in a few things. May I be found worthy when the Bridegroom comes to enter into the marriage supper with Him! But I must not grow weary by the way, and one of my nearest duties is to see that your lamp, child, be kept trimmed and burning. Fear not the darkness; an hour hence the moon will be up, brighter than this fading daylight, and the streets less crowded than they are now. But little preparation is necessary. Whilst I write, think

over all the small follies and sins which most easily beset you, and tell them to me without reserve. You know, my Nina, I am not a harsh judge."

He left her standing and went into the other room, whence in a moment came the sound of a pen scratching rapidly over paper.

Nina remained motionless, her hands clasped—her brows slightly bent—her eyes full of thought and anxiety. Once or twice a fierce light flashed into them, something between scorn and rage, and for the moment she looked like a beautiful demon, but they quickly softened to a weary, pleading expression, and seemed charged with tears, which, however, never fell.

But whatever question she was revolving in her mind, she had settled it, and was—apparently at least—calm when the Priest returned. He seated himself. She knelt before him, and in a low voice detailed her various shortcomings into his ear.

"Is that all?" he said, when she had ceased speaking.

"All," she answered in a whisper.

"You are sure there is nothing more? Look at me and answer. Remember, the blessing falsely obtained is a curse."

As he spoke a slight shiver ran through all her limbs, but it was gone in an instant, and she looked up bravely, almost defiantly, into his face. He gazed at her earnestly.

"You have told me everything?" he questioned.

"Everything," she answered, without moving an eyelid.

There was a short pause. The Priest sighed, and turned his eyes in another direction.

"Enough," he said, "I give you no penance for these small failings, beyond the continual effort to correct them."

Then placing his hands upon her head he muttered a Latin "Benedicete." This done she rose.

"And now," he said, "my dearest child, farewell. May Holy Mary have you in her keeping, and good angels watch round you night and day! It is possible that news may arrive in some circuitous manner from Sicily. Should a packet reach me addressed to you, doubt not that you shall have it as quickly as feet can run. Once more farewell! Should I never see you again"—his voice broke—he made the sign of the Cross on her forehead.

Nina trembled and shivered. She stooped to kiss his hand, and the tears that were now standing in her eyes fell upon it.

"Mark me," he resumed in a moment, "the way is easy. Straight up the Toledo till you come to an archway on the right hand. Two lions support the columns of the arch. Turn down there. The first opening

leads into the Piazza d'Oro. The number written here is your destination. Ask for Maestro Capri; give him this letter, and your task is completed."

He spoke hurriedly, laid his hand a moment on her head, and then gently pushed her out of the room.

"Ursula," he called.

"I am here, Eccellenza," was answered from below.

As Nina descended the stairs she concealed the letter the Priest had given her in the pocket of her red petticoat.

The old woman stood at the foot of the stairs holding a lamp, and regarded the visitor's changed costume without exhibiting any surprise. She helped her assiduously over the doorstep, and shut and barred the door behind her.

Nina walked slowly up the stone path. A mighty struggle was going on within her. A voice whispered to her soul that the enemy stood outside, that her fate waited her across the threshold, and would assuredly take her captive if she went alone.

What fate?

She shuddered, and at the outer door stopped short. And the warning voice said again —

"Go back."

"If I do," she thought, "what can I say? Too late! Too long! And I have denied

and sworn. And if I confess—no chance, no hope. Oh miserable me! Every way miserable. I must go on. I cannot help it. Did I make my own fate? But the burden is too dreadful to bear. No peace, no rest. Shall I go back? Ah! then I lose all. But if I could? Can I? Shall I?" —

A long pause; no sound, no movement. And in that death-like silence a good and a bad angel fought together. The shadows crept on, the stars began to twinkle faintly, the last rays of daylight died out of the dusky garden. And then the figure in the monk's frock, which concealed within its folds a beautiful face, a sharp dagger, and an aching heart, flitted up the steps, passed through the doorway, and went out into the rapidly-darkening street—alone.

CHAPTER II.

OUT into the gathering darkness went the rapid feet and beating heart. Threaded through the narrow San Francesco, turned into the broad Toledo, and following the Priest's directions made for the archway of the Lions.

The street was considerably less crowded now, for it was near supper time, and all who had no positive business to keep them abroad had returned home. Yet Nina started and trembled when a chance look was directed towards her cowled face, till finding that she really attracted no attention, and seeing other figures like herself walking quietly along she gained courage.

She had proceeded some way when a clash and clang of metal, mingled with the tramping of horses, and loud voices of laughter, came upon the wind, and in a few seconds a gallant cavalcade with bright colour, gleaming gold, tossing plumes, swords, spurs, prancing steeds, and all the paraphernalia of military magnificence, emerged from a narrow cutting, and trotted up the street. It was not so dark but that Nina could plainly distinguish them, and she knew from the order in which they rode that it was a French general officer and his staff returning from

some official expedition in an out-of-the-way part of the town, or perhaps from the lateness of the hour beyond it.

With the same anxious curiosity with which she had scanned the regiment in the morning, she now glanced up at these gay horsemen, but instead of hastening on her way as before, she stood still, perfectly rigid, her eyes fixed upon one special object.

Had she been in her own costume, this conduct might have attracted unpleasant attention, but it seemed to be no matter of surprise that a small Carmelite monk should stand to gaze on such a dashing company. She continued looking till the riders had all passed on, then with a stifled sigh which expressed both deep relief and deadly pain, she turned and followed them.

Forgetful apparently of her own mission, of the danger she might incur, of the friendly shelter she had been so anxious to gain, careless that the road she now took was leading her directly away from it, that the evening was growing every moment later, careless apparently of everything but that one object which she kept steadily in view, on to the extreme end of the Toledo, over the Quay of Santa Lucia by the very road which she had traversed so painfully some hours before, she now found herself returning, and while horses and riders go prancing and laughing forward, and the white monk

follows, gliding silently behind, I will relate some events in which both are materially concerned.

Some months prior to this date a French cavalry officer having one day gone up Vesuvius for the purpose of witnessing a predicted eruption—which eruption never took place, in returning lost his way, and after wandering about among lava rocks, rugged paths, patches of oak forest, and endless turnings which led to nothing, came at last upon a pleasant clump of trees, grass and flowers growing beneath them, and lying scattered about, huge boulders of moss-grown stone, the whole offering a delightful and shady rest, of which he gladly took advantage.

He seated himself upon one of these “mossy rocks,” bared his head, and having inhaled the fresh breeze till his weariness began to depart, and his temper (which had already departed) to return, placidly surveyed his retreat. Dark, cool, delicious. The sun slanting in tiny flecks of light through the thick leaves, all flowers that love the shade blossoming in profusion, dainty colours, delicate scents everywhere. Presently extending his circle of investigation his eye was caught by what appeared to be a bed of poppies, and surprised to find them in that locality, he overcame his lassitude sufficiently to rise and walk a few yards to examine them.

more closely. What was his astonishment to find that the patch of colour was no mass of flowers, but the corner of a peasant girl's red petticoat which was protruding from a niche formed by two rocks and a large tree, in which the damsel had comfortably ensconced herself, and with her head resting on a mound of dry moss was fast asleep.

The Frenchman stood still and looked at her. An Italian peasant girl in her first youth, and dressed in her picturesque costume, is always a pleasant and interesting object, even if she can boast no greater share of good looks than falls to the lot of all her countrywomen. The thick, glossy hair, speaking eyes, and regular features which are their national characteristics, set off with becoming colours, cannot fail to please, and a native gracefulness heightens the effect.

But this girl had much more. Not only did she possess a great amount of positive and most striking beauty, but it was of a kind so refined and delicate as to cause equal surprise and admiration when found in any but the highest classes. No wonder, therefore, that the Frenchman stood still, and gazed with great delight and no little amusement at the pleasant object which chance had thrown in his way. The girl slept so peacefully, and with a look of such enjoyable rest on her beautiful face, that unless com-

pelled he would have grieved to disturb her, and besides possessing an artistic taste, which the sleeping picture gratified, he was too much of a gentleman to perplex and terrify her, as he easily imagined an abrupt waking would do. He saw quite clearly that it was a peasant's costume before him, and equally clearly that she who wore it was no peasant. It was a delightful adventure, and he inwardly blessed the heat, the weariness, and the labyrinthine paths which had led to such a charming result. He determined not to disturb her while she slept, and he also determined not to leave her till she woke.

To do him justice, kind and gentlemanly feelings mingled with the selfish ones which caused this determination. He knew that numbers of the French soldiery, both officers and men, had gone up the mountain, in parties and singly, on the same errand as himself, and he feared that some of them might return by the same route, and possibly come upon the sleeping beauty as he had done, and he rightly conjectured what a pitiable state of bewilderment and terror she would be in if awoke by the shouts and laughter of one of these parties, and, starting up, were to find herself in the midst of a group of strangers—perhaps slightly intoxicated—with the road dark before her, and possibly only half conscious of where she

was and how she got there. So he quietly seated himself upon one of the rocks which formed the walls of her chamber, and patiently waited till the statue should receive animation.

He amused himself, meantime, by looking down on her face, and wondering what the eyes could be which possessed such lashes, and what language could come out of those beautiful lips. His curiosity was soon gratified. About half an hour longer and the breeze, which had been gradually rising, swept round the rock so sharply that it blew the dust and twigs in all directions, and some of these alighting on the cheek of the sleeper, startled her abruptly from her dreams.

She opened her eyes, closed them, threw her arms above her head, gave a sort of sigh, opened her eyes again, and fixed them full upon the face of the intruder. For a moment she seemed unconscious of what she saw; the next, she sprang from the earth, and with one bound stood several yards distant, staring at him with a sort of terrified fascination.

The object of her mistrust rose from his seat, and, cap in hand, bowed low as if to a princess.

As she made no responsive movement, he tried speaking —

“A thousand pardons, mademoiselle. I

found you sleeping, and, thinking you might possibly not awake till after sunset, I ventured to remain; for I fear that you will find it difficult to walk over these stony paths in the dark without help."

Still Nina—for she it was—made no answer, nor removed her eyes from his face; so, after some consideration, he essayed another little speech.

"If I can be of the least assistance, mademoiselle, I shall feel only too happy that chance brought me here; if not, if you would rather remain alone, only say so, and, though it would grieve me beyond all words to do it" (here his eyes became most mournfully eloquent), "I will instantly go."

After waiting some time for an answer, and receiving none, which made him mutter to himself, "Is she deaf, I wonder?" he moved as if to depart, but without the slightest intention of going.

He turned his head again, however, with a last appealing look, and then saw that the lovely lips were beginning to open. With an effort Nina found her voice.

"You are very good," she said softly. "I thought—I fancied—in fact, I took you for a Frenchman."

She could not have made a more puzzling remark. What was he to say?

"Yes," she continued, as he made no an-

swer ; "but that is impossible—you must be English."

"Why so ?" he asked, with most genuine astonishment.

"Because, though you speak in French, you act like an Englishman."

"In what way ?" he said, smiling, "for I have not acted at all yet."

"Have you not stayed here to help me, though inconvenient to yourself—I who have never done you any good—whom you never saw before ?"

"And would not a Frenchman do the same ?" he said, trying to speak lightly, but feeling a nervous interest in the answer.

"Frenchmen burn, and pillage, and murder," she said, shuddering violently, "and lay waste the earth which God made beautiful, and bring into slavery those who were born free."

Alas ! there was a bitter truth in her words, and he covered his eyes with his hand and made no answer.

As he remained silent, Nina spoke again.

"I hope you are not angry with me because I took you for a Frenchman," she said in a pleading voice ; and then she walked up to him, and stood with her arms folded like a penitent child.

He removed his hand, and looked at her kindly.

"I am not angry," he said, "only *very*,

very sorry that you have that opinion of the French, for I am French, though you think otherwise, and I am not going either to deny my country or feel ashamed of it."

"You *are* French?" she said in a faint voice, "positively—truly?"

"Positively and truly," he answered. "I am Captain in a cavalry regiment stationed in the town, one of the first which took possession of Naples in the name of King Joseph."

Nina retreated several paces, her expressive face changing every moment with the thoughts that passed through her mind.

"But," he continued with a pleasant smile, "that is no reason for you to refuse the assistance I offer, and which indeed you ought to accept; and before we separate, I must try to make you think more leniently of my countrymen. See," he added, "it is beginning to get quite dark, you will certainly do yourself some harm over these loose stones if I allow you to go alone."

He walked up and placed himself by her side as if determined to accompany her. She stepped back and held up her hand imperatively.

"Go," she said, with a look of positive loathing. "I would rather fall headlong over these rocks than be saved by a Frenchman."

"You shall not choose," he said, becoming angry in his turn, "where you go, there will

I go also, and keep you from harm in spite of yourself."

And again a kindly instinct mingled with the irritation which prompted his words, for he thought, "Should she come across any of our men and give them the language she has given me, I would not answer for the consequences."

Nina's only answer was to fling herself away from him and commence a rapid descent down the precipitous path by which they were standing. But nimble as she was her adversary was nimbler still. She jumped from rock to rock, he was beside her before she had well alighted; she slid down slippery paths of dry turf or polished lava, with a bound he reached the spot she was making for; she scrambled painfully over loose stones and gravel; he marched like a giant beside her, crunching the pebbles with his heavy boots, and once when she slipped he actually caught and held her up till she regained her footing, and then with a low bow stood aside that she might resume her independent movements. Turn where she would, run, jump, or slide, he kept his word, for he kept close to her; she, hot, breathless, and angry, he, strong, cool, and perfectly good-humoured. At last they came to an abrupt stand. They were on a ledge of rock, some five or six feet above the next level, the only path leading to it being a zigzag track barely a foot

wide, and covered with loose stones. Nina stood still dismayed; for the enemy was there before her, and pass him she could not.

"Now," said the Frenchman with quiet triumph, "it is my turn, *ma belle*. You will either condescend to accept my assistance or remain where you are; but if you *do* remain, I remain also. You know I told you that I would, and"—with another low bow—"a Frenchman always keeps his word."

Nina looked round despairing; it was getting quite dark, there was no chance of help, she could scarcely maintain her footing where she stood; to return up the mountain was impossible, for besides feeling that her strength was not equal to the exertion, it would only bring the hated Frenchman on her track again, and take her still farther away from home. But own herself vanquished, and ask him for the assistance she had so proudly refused? She would die first! And having formed this resolution, she looked about for some means of escape from her perplexing situation *without* that very desperate alternative.

Her quick eye soon discovered that though the rock where she stood was many feet above the one she wished to reach, yet on the lower one the turf grew thick and soft, and knowing the locality well, she remembered that on one side was an easy descent, apparently closed over with bushes, difficult

to discover even in daytime by a stranger, and by an uncertain light almost impossible. Could she but reach that level she could slip down by that descent and effectually distance her pursuer who would not be able for some time at least to make out where she had vanished to. She measured the distance carefully with her eye, and determined to risk it. Indeed it was her only chance of escape from the surrounding difficulties, and then what joy to baffle the insolent foreigner in the very moment of his fancied victory!

She glanced at him. He still stood, commanding the position in military phrase, an easy smile parting his lips, which displayed most exquisite teeth, and a sort of imperious good-humour twinkling in his handsome blue eyes. He was *very* handsome, and Nina acknowledged it to herself with a sort of rage.

"The cruel, hateful, usurping Frenchman. Yes, she would do it, she would delay no longer—and if she were killed he would know that she preferred that alternative to the degradation of his companionship!"

She advanced to the edge of the cliff, turned a look of haughty defiance on the self-constituted guardian of the pass, sprang, and vanished!

For a moment the Frenchman was so amazed and bewildered that he involuntarily crossed himself—with him a very rare habit

—as the idea flashed into his mind that he had come upon a being not wholly of this earth; and strange fantastic stories that he had heard at various times came crowding into his dizzy brain; stories of weird creatures of dubious origin and incomprehensible existence, sometimes found wandering on the burning mountains, seen at intervals during eruptions, horribly close to the Crater, suggesting thoughts too dreadful for language; how mortal men, aye, and women too, had been enticed by these beings, and had followed them, and their after fate had ever remained an impenetrable mystery. And then he looked round on the wild, dreary rocks, and felt the awful loneliness of a place where a living creature like himself, seemed to have been suddenly extinguished; and, brave soldier though he was, felt horribly afraid of the darkness, into which a solid breathing body, had apparently melted away.

He never stirred from the spot where he stood, or looked in any direction but the one point where Nina had disappeared; and so he might have stood and looked till sunrise, but for a faint sound which struck upon his ear. He started and listened with agonising anxiety. It was repeated, and evidently came from below. He rushed to the edge of the rock, threw himself flat down, and looked over into the grey space beneath. Not a sound had accompanied Nina's sudden exit,

and he fancied the distance far greater than it was, so the idea of her having jumped down was too wild a folly to enter his head, and it was with confused feelings of relief and apprehension that after straining his sight for a little he distinguished a mass of clothing, which he at once guessed to be the unfortunate girl.

To bound down the zigzag, stride over the spongy turf, kneel beside this object, and lift it up was the work of a moment.

How great was his joy to find that it was she indeed, flesh and blood, and moaning with mortal pain. With a sigh of pent-up terror all his ghastly fancies took flight.

On feeling herself raised she spoke, but in Italian, and he now remarked for the first time that hitherto she had spoken French, and that so pure and idiomatic, that it had never occurred to him that she was speaking, to her, a foreign language.

But he had no time now to wonder where she had gained her marvellous fluency, and he spoke, imploring her to say where she was hurt. This time she answered in French, and, strange to say, every shade of anger had gone out of her voice.

"It is nothing of consequence," she said, "only my ankle; but I cannot stand, I am perfectly helpless;" then in a tone of despair, "what am I to do?"

"What a brute I have been," he muttered

to himself, "to drive her to this; and an idiot too; I might have known that that brow, and those lips would never accept defeat."

And then with the most miserable self-reproaches he poured out regret, remorse, sympathy, offers of help of all and every kind. Could he do anything to relieve the pain, might he carry her home, would she rather that he would leave her and run for help, could she ever forgive him—could he ever forgive himself?

"Oh, hush, pray," she entreated, "it was all my own fault, you bore from me what I did not think anyone would bear, and you are kind to me as you would be to your own dearest friend. I am only grieving now at having given you such bitter words—so much pain."

"And I," he said, "am heart-broken that my wilful malice should have caused this misery, when, indeed, dear mademoiselle, my motive was a better one than you will perhaps give me credit for."

And in a few words he told her his real reason for not allowing her to proceed on her way alone.

It was too dusk for him to notice her changing colour, but even in the dim light he could see the large, lovely eyes lifted with a strange expression to his own.

"The goodness has been all yours," she

said softly, "the wickedness all mine. And I know that you are too good to deny me now the help that I refused so rudely before. I must try to get home, and I can if you will do what I ask."

"'If?' Ah, mademoiselle" —

"Promise me," she said, laying her hand upon his arm, "to do as I tell you, and ask no questions. I know that whatever you promise you will perform."

"I will do anything and everything," he said, "except leave you alone."

"No," she replied, "I shall not ask that, for you must come with me."

She was silent for a little time, and so was he. They certainly were in a strange situation. Sitting on a lonely ridge of rock, the darkness gathering round them, utter strangers to each other, yet bound together for the moment by a tie neither could break; such enemies, and such friends.

"My ankle is better," Nina said at last, "and I know an easy path by which we can reach a place where I am sure to find help. But you must come no farther than I tell you. You will see that I am in safe hands, then you must go your own way, which will be easy, and"—after a pause—"if you can, forget all that I have said, and me too."

"The first," he said, "I promise willingly; the second I shall not even try. It would be useless."

She made no answer to this, except by directing him how to help her to stand up. With his very effective assistance she was able to move about tolerably well, and soon found the path she was seeking. It was practicable, even easy, and they got on rapidly. He worked for her energetically; lifted her over the ruts and fissures, moved aside the bushes, rolled away the loose stones, walked backwards down the slippery paths, that if she fell he might catch her, in fact, was crutch, guide, and pioneer in one. They were by no means silent; Nina talked rapidly her sweet French, asked questions about France, and what her companion thought of Naples; but not one word did she say of herself. She listened gravely, almost reverentially, to his answers; indeed, her first dislike appeared to have changed into a profound and wondering respect. She deferred to him on every point, saying, when he did not agree with her, "You must know best."

Her voice was so sweet, her movements, even in that crippled state, so graceful, her thoughts so refined, yet quaint and original, that, the more he looked and listened, the more he wondered how she came to be in the lonely place he found her, in a dress, evidently not her own, without companion or attendant, apparently mistress of her own time and actions, which he knew well the

Neapolitan ladies of rank were not, in a slumber so deep that it seemed more the trance of an enchanted princess, than a slight *siesta* in the open air, and withal so well acquainted with every pathway, every cliff and yawning crevice, that, even in the present obscurity, she knew precisely where to place her foot, and directed her companion where to place his, and which showed that her wanderings there must have been long and frequent, and this, joined to a face so beautiful, that he positively *could* not take his eyes from it, a mind which seemed at home in the knowledge of ages past, but timid and uncertain in the present, all combined to create in him a weird and bewitched feeling, and he feared to lose his hold of her even for a moment, lest she should again vanish, and more effectually than before. But the charm of her presence had worked sufficiently in him, by this time, to put aside all fear or fancy, and had his guardian angel whispered in his ear that she was one of those strange, fantastic beings he had heard of, he would still have followed her, careless of the consequences.

Before long they came to a more inhabited locality, and, as far as the Frenchman could discern, it appeared to be a desolate region, bordered on one side by the bay, apparently beyond the Chiaia; but the darkness was too great now to distinguish anything thoroughly.

Here Nina seated herself on a stone a little way off the road, and bade her companion retreat a few paces, to be out of sight.

"Surely I am that already," he urged, "who would notice me in this dim light?"

"If I am seen," she said, "so will you be, and I intend to be seen; I came here on purpose."

"But, dear mademoiselle, where is the harm; if you relate your accident my presence is accounted for."

He really had a haunting feeling that, if he moved from her side, she would disappear in the gloom.

"Ah!" she said, "you must not question; you promised, and remember"—laughing for the first time—"a Frenchman always keeps his word."

"True," he said with a sigh; "my wickedness recoils upon myself, but I obey."

"Listen to me," she said; "I know that help will come soon. When you see me moved, follow at a little distance, still keeping beyond notice. Before you lose sight of me you will come to a road that leads straight to the Toledo. Take it, you will know your way then. Should we ever meet in future, you must not recognise me if anyone is present. Farewell, signor, accept my grateful thanks for all that you have done. May a true heart and a strong arm ever stand by you in the hour of need!

And, oh ! Santissima," she added, clasping her hands and lifting her beautiful eyes, "remember my prayer, and help him when no other help is nigh. Go, go," she said hurriedly, "I hear voices."

He had scarcely attained the position she had assigned to him when a party of men passed on the road below, and he heard Nina's clear voice call to them. They stopped. She called again; they came up to her, and he could distinguish them chattering volubly, with dim movements through the dusky air as of hands and arms gesticulating violently. Then two or three of them set off running. Presently they returned with a vehicle of some kind, and he guessed from their movements that they were lifting his crippled companion on to it.

Then the whole party set off, still shouting and vociferating in the hideous Neapolitan dialect.

Obedient to Nina's wish, he did not move till they were some way advanced. Then he rose and followed. His conjecture had been right, they were at the extreme and desolate end of the Marina. Before he had gone far he recognised a turning which he knew to be a shorter way to the Toledo, then the quay of Santa Lucia, and as if interpreting his thought, from the group before him, something white passed rapidly backwards and forwards in the air, and he knew that Nina

was giving him a signal of farewell. He could venture nothing in return but a low whistle, which, he thought, she might understand. The next moment he turned up the road and lost sight of this mysterious maiden without having ascertained one fact concerning her.

CHAPTER III.

It is not to be supposed that a Frenchman, aged twenty-six, handsome, high-spirited and adventurous, would allow an affair of this kind to end then and there; at any rate the one we have to do with determined that it should not. During his lonely homeward journey he had time to reflect on various details of the day's doings, which had escaped his notice in the hurry and confusion of the moment.

The girl's striking and most peculiar beauty, the strangely deep sleep in which he found her, her vehement dislike to his nation, the unaccountable change which came over her after she fell, an unnatural light which now and then flashed into her eyes, the resolute manner in which she avoided giving any account of herself, and the influence which he now found she must have obtained over his own mind to make him so amenable to all her wishes, filled him with astonishment as he came quietly to consider them. Before he reached his quarters he had resolved to commence with the morning light, a vigorous search after the fair sprite, which had appeared and disappeared in so remarkable a manner. Accordingly the next day and for many days following, he made a pilgrimage

up the mountain, by the same route which he had before taken, and tried also to return the same way, hoping to come upon the nook where he had encountered the sleeping peasant girl. But though it seemed to him that he traversed the entire district, he never again could discover that exact spot. He made enquiries of everyone he fell in with concerning the eruption, which had been his object that day, hoping to hear as it were by chance if any accident had occurred.

He made enquiries, too, concerning the people of the neighbourhood, peasantry as well as gentry. "Were they much in fear of the eruptions, did they go up the mountain, as strangers did, to view them, were they wise as to the signs of coming trouble, supposed they were well acquainted with all the paths and roads to the Crater, &c., &c.," but for all this he got very little satisfaction.

"Yes, the people were accustomed to the eruptions ; unless it was something very bad they did not mind ; they knew the mountain very well, but only went up for business or pleasure ; an eruption *had* been talked about, but appeared to have been a mistake ; no, accidents were very rare, they knew how to keep out of the way."

Such were the answers he received to his enquiries, and after each failure he felt more mystified than before.

One day, while wandering over a barren

tract where sulphur and pumice-stone seemed to have it all to themselves, he encountered an old man, a herbalist, of whom he knew something both by sight and report. He lived in a village at the foot of the mountain, was wretchedly poor, as Italians of that class generally are, but reported to be wise and learned in no ordinary degree. He was collecting plants and minerals, and after watching his movements for some time the Frenchman accosted him.

"Do you find this an interesting employment, my good friend?"

The old man looked up, and his countenance betokened anything but satisfaction at the uniform which his interrogator wore.

"It is interesting to me," he answered, coldly, "others might not find it so." And he continued his occupation without offering another word.

But our Frenchman was not to be balked, and he had a happy knack of wiling the most sullen spirits into amiability, and by dint of persevering questions, real interest in the answers, and a deferential manner, succeeded at last in thawing the old man, and gaining as much information as he desired. It was rather a polyglot language which they spoke, for neither understood the other's native tongue sufficiently to make it the entire medium of conversation, but where they

were at a loss in the one they took to the other, and so got on tolerably well.

"I myself," said the herbalist, in answer to a remark from his companion, "predicted an eruption a few days ago, and though it did not take place, I cannot allow that I was wrong."

"But how right?" said the Frenchman.

"Right in this way: that I did not use the word eruption. I said the mountain was at work, and something would come of it. Young man, you are interested I see in these things, and you have not the usual levity of your countrymen. I will tell you some of the grounds on which I based my prediction.

"One day I was high up on the mountain, indeed close to the Crater, when evening began to close in. I had gone farther than I intended, seeking a rare fossil sometimes to be found among the lava. I was loth to abandon the search till the waning light compelled me. I know every path and crevice so well, that darkness was no hindrance to my return, and I sat down to rest awhile before descending.

"As I sat, I felt the ground beneath me tremble. It was not much, but peculiar. In a few minutes it quivered again and a confused sound accompanied it. It grew more distinct; I stood up alarmed. The mountain is not treacherous, we always have warnings

before an eruption, therefore it was not that which troubled me. But the sounds which now grew every moment louder, were strange and awful. I could have sworn to hearing shrieks, shouts, groans, nay, even language, my own and others, issue from the Crater but a little way above me. Presently a column of white smoke shot into the air, and quickly dispersed. The sounds grew terrific, and with a crash as of riven rocks, what seemed to be two solid bodies of fire leapt up, the first small, silvery, and wavering, the other large, red and fierce. I now had serious apprehensions, for after hovering a moment in the air, the first fire shot down the mountain somewhere in this direction, and the other followed. Of course I concluded that they were two pieces of burning rock forced up by the boiling flood below, and I expected every moment to see a stream of lava follow, but none came. After this the mountain was quiet for a space, and I thought, 'If I would escape now is the time.'

"I looked again towards the Crater to see if anything would indicate which way the lava was likely to come, if it came at all. And then I saw the strangest sight! The larger body of fire which I had seen fall down the side of the mountain, appeared again on the summit, and instantly vanished into the Crater. The uproar which immediately followed was so awful, that I in-

voluntarily exclaimed aloud, 'Jesu ! Maria ! Have mercy !' In a moment the hubbub ceased, the ground shook no more, everything remained peaceful. I recovered from my terror, waited awhile to see if anything more would occur; and, finding nothing, crept down, and arrived safely at my house in the village yonder.

"But the most incomprehensible part is this, that nowhere can I find any trace of freshly thrown rock or lava, so I must suppose that my sight deceived me in some way."

"I should think," said the Frenchman, who had listened with intense interest, "that the burning rocks you saw, fell back into the Crater."

"It may be so; *one* I distinctly saw return into the Crater."

"But," said the incredulous listener, "it could not be the one which fell down the mountain. How could it get back?"

The herbalist looked at him keenly from under his bushy eyebrows.

"It is quite possible," he said, "that *three* masses were ejected, and all fell back again; but from this I drew sure conclusions that the mysterious fires were at work, and would in some way fulfil their mission. And my belief is that they have done so."

"But how?" persisted the Frenchman, "as there has been no eruption."

"No, there has not; at least, beyond

what I saw. But"—looking steadily into his companion's face—"the fires that purify the earth do not always work by eruption."

"Why, what in Heaven's name can you mean?" said the astonished soldier.

The old man gathered together his bags and baskets, put them in order, slung them on his shoulder, and prepared to descend.

"Listen to me," he said with a smile. "I have read some of your writers, and I do not like them—they sneer at the mysteries which they cannot understand; and I have read some of the writers of the English, and I do like them. And one of them says that there are things in the Heaven and things in the earth which are beyond the comprehension of mortal man. Do you mean to descend, signor; if so, I will show you some specimens of the plant you were admiring lower down."

"I will go with you," said the Frenchman; for though he knew that the old man would give him no satisfaction as to the meaning of his ambiguous words, yet he would not leave him uncourteously, after gaining from him all the information he could.

And he listened attentively, though with rather a confused mind, to the explanations of various specimens of plants and minerals which were shown to him. When their roads separated they stopped to bid one another good-night.

"Young man," said the herbalist, "you are French, and you know that we Italians have no reason to love your nation. But I believe that there is some good to be found among all, and I think there is good in you. Any way, you have given a very pleasant hour of conversation to me, an insignificant old man. I should like to do you a little good in return. You are fond of wandering about this mountain—you have much curiosity and a brave spirit. The two combined may lead you into danger. Nay"—seeing the soldier's handsome face flush—"not what you would understand by the word, but other, greater, against which your strong arms and bold heart will avail nothing. Doubtless, you will call me a foolish old man; but if you would gratify me greatly, you will promise to wear somewhere about you this little amulet when you wander in these lonely places."

And he held out to him a small cross of carved wood, with one word engraved upon it—"Gethsemane."

"It is doubly holy," continued the herbalist, "for it is cut from an olive tree in that Garden of Gardens, and that tree must be a descendant of those which stood there witnesses of our Lord's agony. The danger I speak of, though closing in on every side, can harm none upon whose heart that blessed sign rests!"

Whatever the Frenchman's religious opinions might be, he was touched by the kindness of the gift, and the strong and most happy faith which the giver had in it. He would have asked some questions about this mysterious danger, for his mind instantly reverted to the same wild fancies which had taken possession of it once before; but he saw that on that point his companion would speak no plainer. So he took the cross, and thanked the donor as earnestly as if he completely shared his belief.

"I will do," he said, "as you wish, and sincerely hope that it may be all the good to me that you intend."

Then they parted—the herbalist to a very tasteless supper of maccaroni and water melon, and afterwards the sound sleep produced by light food and fresh air; the soldier to a meal of hot meat and strong wine, and afterwards disturbed dreams, in which he saw the sleeping peasant girl change into a flame of fire and jump down the Crater of Vesuvius; that, trying to follow her, the herbalist interposed, and forced upon him a cross so large and heavy that he could scarcely move under the weight of it, and while trying to rid himself of this, a woman with a veiled face offered to relieve him of it. This he would not allow. She insisted, he refused; she caught

it with both hands, he tried to loosen her hold; she clung, and so struggling both seemed to fall down a precipice together. Then they touched the ground, and the veil fell from the woman's face, and he knew it again—the same face which he had seen disappear into the fiery hollow, calm and beautiful now as he had first seen her sleeping, but dead, quite dead; and while he lamented over her, friendly voices began to call him “Claud, Claud,” and then he started up, and saw in the light of early dawn his own chamber, and a brother officer standing beside him, shouting with stentorian lungs, “was that the way he kept his engagements?” And then he knew it was a dream, a hideous nightmare; and remembered that he had promised to make a daylight excursion to see some lovely spot at sunrise.

A few days more went on, and Claud, as I shall take the liberty of calling our Frenchman, had almost given up the very hope of meeting again the beautiful creature who so completely occupied his mind. Still, from habit and a sort of lingering expectation, he went wandering about his old haunts in a moody, aimless manner, very unlike his usual brisk and merry humour.

He did not forget to carry the little cross with him, whether out of respect to his own

word, or a grateful feeling to the giver, or a dawning faith in its power, he would himself have been puzzled to determine.

Many of his companions noticed his changed spirits, preoccupied mind, and long absences day after day, and were not slow in rallying him on the cause. But it effected no change. They exhausted their skill in efforts to discover where he went, and what he went for, to no purpose. He had become so well acquainted with all the cuts and turns in the city and its neighbourhood, that he could easily avoid being followed; and even when they succeeded in tracing him a few miles beyond the walls, they would lose sight of him behind some absurdly small clump of trees or rocks, and see him no more till evening or, perhaps, next day.

So they came to the conclusion that Claud was bewitched, but by whom or what they had not been lucky enough to discover.

Claud knew that he was watched and followed, but, secure in the precautions he took, heeded it not. He would not for worlds have allowed any of these officious friends to know the object that occupied so much both of his thoughts and time, especially in his present uncertain and mystified condition.

At last one afternoon, while scrambling up a rocky slope which he remembered de-

scending that ever-memorable day, a voice above called out in French —

“Stop—take care.”

With a thrill of delight he looked up. She was there, perched on a convenient pinnacle where she could watch him the whole way without being herself seen, dressed as he had seen her before, but ten thousand times fairer than she had then appeared; in her cheeks a rich carnation colour flitting up and down the marble skin, and a whole world of beauty shining in her wonderful eyes.

Seeing that she was recognized and understood, she spoke again.

“Not that way, signor, there is a deep fissure there, you might not see it. This side, by the blocks of red lava.”

He turned to where she pointed, and found an easy ascent by huge lava blocks forming a sort of gigantic staircase. In a second he was beside her, and with true French “effusion” threw himself upon his knees, clasping for a moment both her hands in his.

“Ah, mademoiselle, how happy am I—and I have been so miserable. You left me cruelly, without a word—without a sign by which to find you again—and you were hurt, and you might be ill. It is torture that I have endured—I have never known if the sun shone—but now the universe is light again.”

If Nina could possibly have looked lovelier than she did, when he first caught sight of her, she looked it now as she listened to this rhapsody. Since their last meeting a new beauty had come into her face, indefinable, indescribable, but visible, and glorifying all the rest. It was the old story. The statue flushing with life—Undine feeling her soul.

"I am glad you came here," she said. "I wanted to thank you for your care of me the other night, and for doing all I wished, and to tell you that I am quite well. You showed me such goodness and kindness."

"Goodness, kindness," he echoed, "rudeness, barbarity; but I was angry because you despised my nation, and so I made myself all that you thought us."

"Stop—hush!" she said, a look of great pain crossing her face. "I have forgotten that you are French, I shall not believe it; you are English, I have settled it."

"My mother was," he said, willing to humour her.

"Ah, yes," she answered smiling, "I guessed in you an English descent."

"But why," he persisted, "were you so harsh with me at first? I was the same then that I am now."

"I had not arranged my mind," she answered, with grave simplicity; "when I fell and hurt myself, when I was in pain, then I knew that I had done wrong."

"And you reached home safely?" he asked. "I saw that you had obtained help, and, obeying the injunctions you had given me, kept aloof—how unwillingly, *mademoiselle*, you may imagine."

He had risen from his devotional attitude, and was seated beside her, scanning the lines and curves of a face which without exaggeration was perfect.

"I explained," she said, moving uneasily, "that I was hurt, and could not return sooner."

The Frenchman saw that she avoided meeting his eye, and divined with a secret glee that her friends—whoever they might be—had not been informed of that curious adventure on the mountain. From that it was easy to jump to the conclusion that she was there at that moment clandestinely, and *therefore* drawn by some strong attraction. He was by no means deficient in self-appreciation, and the effect of this reasoning on his mind was anything but unpleasant.

"Tell me," he said, "fair Contadina, what name is it, which, being yours, becomes beautiful?"

Again the rosy flush; the light shining and dancing in the eloquent eyes. Alas, poor Nina! She certainly did not understand French compliments—perhaps I ought to say compliments from Frenchmen.

"I am called Nina," she answered simply.

"Nina? Good, excellent; it is a name that belongs by right in the noble and lovely. And, sweet Nina, where did you learn that marvellous fluency in my native tongue which you possess?"

"French?" she said, laughing. "Oh, it is almost native to me, I always spoke it in the convent; the nuns were nearly all French."

"French nuns in Italy?" he exclaimed. "What brought them here?"

"They fled from the persecution," she answered, with great gravity.

"Persecution? what persecution?—when?"

"Oh, long ago," she answered wearily, passing her hand over her forehead, "when I was quite young."

When she was quite young! He looked at the blooming creature but now on the threshold of life, and wondered what epoch she meant to indicate by that.

"Perhaps you mean the Revolution," he said suddenly.

"Perhaps so," she answered a little impatiently. "We call it the persecution."

"Well, then," resumed Claud, "one name is Nina, and the other" —

Nina made no answer, but sat gazing on the opposite rock as if she had not heard his remark.

"Tell me the other name, *ma belle*, that

by it I may trace you, should I be so unhappy as to lose sight of you again."

She still made no reply, except by turning her head directly away from him.

"You will not tell me," he said, standing up; "then, most perverse Nina, I will find it out for myself."

She moved quickly round to where he stood. Her face was white and rigid, her eyes looked quite black, and full of threatening fire.

"I will not tell you," she said, "and if you try to discover, you will never see me again; no, never!"

She knew by this time how effectual a threat that would be.

"See now," he said, seating himself again beside her, "how much more candid and reasonable I am; I will tell you my name, and ask you to call me by it, too. My name is Claud—Claud de la Meronne. Speak, my fairest, does it please you, will you not say it, just once?"

She was smiling again now, and the beautiful colour came back to her cheeks.

"Yes," she said, "I like the sound."

Then, in a whisper almost to herself, she repeated it: "Claud."

"Ah!" said that unscrupulous soldier, "how dear my name is to me now."

With sudden nervousness Nina turned the conversation to other topics, and the

Frenchman was obliged to follow. He found her wonderfully well informed for her age and country, with a leaning towards mysterious knowledge and superstition, and apparently possessed with the belief that the traditions of bygone ages were as much to be trusted as the events happening round her every day, all of which was to be expected from her convent education. She talked well and rapidly on all subjects, asked innumerable questions, and answered all that were put to her with perfect simplicity and candour, except when they in any way touched on her own parentage or residence. Then she became mute and cold as marble.

They wandered about, carefully keeping away from all beaten tracks as if by mutual consent, which indeed it was, then sat down again, then wandered again, till the sun began to get low, and Nina said —

“See, the west is all purple, I must go.”

And Claud determined to make another effort to discover her name, and her reason for concealing it.

“I will go with you,” he said.

She looked at him, and shook her head gravely.

“I have told you,” she replied, “that you must not. Why will you make me unhappy?”

He laughed, and pushed back his bright curls.

"Mademoiselle, I mean to go with you to your own door. There can be no reason why I should not: we met by chance, and you are good enough to say that I have afforded you some help. Surely that is a sufficient reason for speaking to me again. The most fierce of duennas could not blame you for that. Ah!" with a sudden cry, "what have I done?"

For Nina's face was convulsed, and she clutched the rock for support.

"If you follow me," she said, in a voice passionate but dreary, "you go to a danger from which I cannot save you, and you bring upon me a punishment which will last beyond my life. If you wish to do this, come; I cannot help myself; but I tell you solemnly that you will destroy me, body and soul, and yourself too. Can I say more?"

The truth was evident in her face. His course was plain.

"Forgive me, mademoiselle, I never guessed so strong a reason for concealment. From this moment you shall do just as you please. But," in an imploring voice, "am I never to see you again?"

Nina's voice trembled still as she answered —

"You are so good, I can trust you in everything. You will let me come and go as I like, and ask no questions, and leave me when I tell you?"

"I will do everything that you wish," he

said, subdued by the extraordinary terror she had shown, "if I may see you again, truly and for a certainty."

"Truly and certainly," she answered in a whisper. "When you want to see me, come here—you will remember the blocks of lava, red lava; here you will find me. I dare not stay now, my time is up. Good-night, signor. Wait here five minutes, then go any way you will."

She gave him her hand, which he kissed very reverentially; then she sprang away, and slid like a thing of air down the lava stairs, without appearing to touch them.

Directly the five minutes had expired, he darted to the same spot, and gazed eagerly over the whole expanse of mountain and road which lay beneath. On the path nearest two boys were fighting; a little below, an old woman was leading a goat, and on the high road a fat priest ambled on a mule; these were the only objects in sight.

"Strange," muttered Claud, as he turned his eyes round and round to see if any shelter was near enough for her to have reached in that time. "*She cannot* have got down these rough paths so quickly, flesh and blood could not do it," and then with a sudden thought he drew out the little cross given him by the herbalist, and looked at it attentively.

"Bah!" he said, "am I growing super-

stitious? What virtue can there be in this piece of wood?"

Still he looked at it.

"Gethsemane," he said, reading the word engraved on it. "Can there be any truth in that fable?"

He spoke aloud, and the echo from the surrounding rocks, repeated in a questioning tone —

"Fable?"

He started, and then was angry with himself for starting.

"That girl has possessed me, I believe; between her beautiful face, and her mysterious terrors, I have lost myself. Come, I must find myself again."

He put back the cross, and began slowly to descend.

"Perhaps that old man was not altogether wrong," he thought, "to warn me; for the danger, if danger there be, is certainly one which I cannot cope with. What could he mean? Those bright eyes are the greatest danger I have met with yet, and I should not think he could know anything about *them*."

And with a thoughtful face and lingering steps he pursued his way homewards.

Whatever danger the eyes, or any other things might possess, the brave Captain of Dragoons was determined to face it. After this he never again tried to discover Nina's name or residence, but every day he came.

faithful as the hour itself to the spot where he knew that he would find his beauty. And every day he found her, each day fairer than before, sweeter, nobler, more entirely captivating. Her presence became a sort of intoxication to him; truly his friends were in the right, now, when they said he was bewitched.

There was one thing only which marred this delightful, mysterious friendship. A peculiarity, he could give it no other name, in this fair and fascinating stranger, both of manner and conversation, which effectually prevented him from what is vulgarly called "making love."

That she was as much attracted by him as he was by her, a far less penetrating man could have seen, and what else could have brought her day after day, and in fear of such penalties as she had herself pronounced, to the very place where she knew she would meet him? There was no want of feeling about her. She was vividly alive to his smallest word or look; she blushed beautifully at all his fanciful compliments; she looked miserable if he spoke of war or any duty likely to bring him into danger, and when he said on one occasion that he was likely soon to be ordered back to France, she sank down and buried her face in the earth, and all his entreaties could not induce her to look up, till he contrived to contradict

his own words; and then she rose, wan, weak, with hollow eyes, pale lips, a wreck made in a moment, and in another moment bright, sparkling, lovely as ever! Truly she was a strange compound. And it certainly *was* a deprivation to the susceptible Frenchman, that he could not, to use that hackneyed phrase again, “make love.” He *liked* making love, and to make it to such unparalleled beauty would have been bliss indeed. But he could not cure that little defect in his adored one’s taste, so he had to endure it, which he did with true philosophy, taking the happiness he could get, and hoping for more in time.

But no state of things lasts long without change, and this was no exception to the general rule.

Nina’s feelings we cannot analyse very minutely. She was noble, truthful, high-minded, generous, self-denying; yet she knew that her life was a falsehood; every word a deceit, every action a trick; mean excuses for ever on her lips, ignoble inventions constantly in her brain; shameful abuses of confidence, ungenerous additions of trouble to those weighed down by it already, constant trampling in the dust of all that she had been taught to believe highest and holiest—this was the course that she was pursuing! And she had no power to alter it. Yet she might have had. At

first she could have broken the slight chain easily. One truthful confession, one noble self-accusation, and help would have met her on all sides to assist her own efforts, but she deliberately chose the crooked path, because she would not deny herself a gratification, though she knew it to be, to her at least, unlawful. And then the chain grew stronger and stronger every day, till no earthly power could break it. What at first was but a momentary charm, caused by the Frenchman's handsome face and chivalrous conduct to herself, strengthened into quite another feeling, as she discovered in him qualities which she had never expected to meet save in romance or legend; least of all, embodied in one of a nation which she had been taught to abhor and dread. This, too, was her defence to her own conscience. Surely such a one as he should not be included in the unsparing curse levelled by every true Italian, and every faithful child of the Church against that insolent and impious nation. Yet her own clear mind never deceived itself. She knew the extent of her backsliding, and the punishment it deserved, and must inevitably bring upon her, sooner or later, yet she continued in it defiantly at first, helplessly afterwards. By degrees the knowledge came upon her, that all that life could give in exchange for that one treasure would be worthless. Then it was too late to draw

back. And so fate worked on, and events reached their climax, and then came a change.

One day Claud was absent. She waited, wandering in every direction; again and again retracing her steps, looking on this side and that; tortured with fear, jealousy, apprehension of every kind. But the sun sank, and he had not come, and her heart that night was like lead.

But next day he came, and she was happy again, for he gave some weighty reason which satisfied her.

The next day, and the next he was absent. She tried to think that he had good reasons. The third day he came, but was pale and weary-looking, out of spirits, abrupt in manner, distrait, then self-accusing, remorseful, explanatory, hot and cold by turns, altogether unlike himself, and, not the *least* significant sign, hurried his parting words, and left her at their meeting-place before she herself was prepared to go.

Bewildered, terrified, conscious-stricken, dimly foreshadowing the evil to come, she crept miserably home. How she longed for someone to confide in, someone to give advice and comfort; but there was no one. Her besetting sin, pride, which had always made her intolerant of control, which had made contradiction insupportable, and self-denial impossible, the fiend which she

fancied was her slave, had now become her master. She had sacrificed to the demon, and must now do his bidding. She could not, after such a length of self-indulgence, go and confess her million of meannesses and falsities, and ask for pity and help; she had revelled in forbidden sunshine, and she saw the clouds rising, and no shelter at hand.

And her forebodings were not groundless.

From that day Claud never appeared again on the mountain side. Week followed week, he never came. She wandered hopelessly about all their usual haunts; she sat for hours in the caves and hollow rocks where she had been accustomed to watch for his coming; where she had ingeniously concealed herself when they parted; thereby intensifying the fascination of mystery that surrounded her, and where she had often seen him pause beside her hiding-place, and heard him mingle remarks of astonishment at her swift disappearance, with rhapsodies on her wonderful beauty; and remembering this she hoped again, and looked for him still, carrying her eyes up and down the prospect, scanning nervously every distant speck, trembling with agitation when a figure approached; but in vain; his bright blue eyes, his chesnut curls, never once dawned upon her aching sight.

What had become of him? Had he

wearied of her, forgotten her? Surely not. The cessation had been too sudden. Was he ill, dying, dead? At that agonising thought every minor evil shrank into nothing. Had he been ordered away, and remembering her former agitation feared to tell her? That seemed the most feasible explanation, and she clutched it with despairing energy. Would he ever return, and when? So she thought, argued and feared, while the time went slowly on, and she grew more miserable every day. Her anxiety made her brave. She left the secluded and secret paths where they had been accustomed to meet, and ventured into the more frequented roads, in the vain hope of finding him; and thus it was that she had encountered the party of French soldiers, though she falsely told the Priest that she had lost her way.

And now we come back to the point where we left her, following the troop of riders, far from her own destination.

When she left the Priest's dwelling, she knew that he would even then have given her comfort and absolution, had she freely confessed all to him, but a weighty reason was thrown into the opposite scale.

Might she not have a chance in her new abode, in the midst of the busy city—among people coming in contact every hour

with the French of all classes, of hearing something of one whose name she remembered so well?

"Yes, it was more than possible, it was probable, it was almost certain."

She threw every other consideration to the winds; she would continue her course of deceit; she began again to hope. And as if the Prince of Evil was determined to reward her quickly for the step she had so decidedly taken on his side, as the cavalcade came up the street, she saw riding on the General's right, the unmistakable face, the laughing eyes, the bright smile, the light locks, Claud himself, alive, well, happy.

From that moment she determined that nothing but death should make her lose sight of him again, till she had spoken to him. And so she followed them all the tedious way, till they stopped before a magnificent building on the Chiaia. With mingled joy and terror she recognized it. Joy, for she knew it so well; entrance and concealment here would be easy; every chamber, every secret door, every concealed passage—she would find her way among them as perfectly by midnight as broad day; yet terror, for the hand of fate seemed to have brought her back here. Yet she wavered not a moment in her purpose.

She stood at a safe distance and saw the riders dismount, and grooms lead their horses

away. There was a little gate opening into a sort of shrubbery, neglected and disused, and generally supposed to lead nowhere.

But Nina knew better. She slipped in by that gate when the riders had all entered the house, and concealed herself among the trees. When all was quiet, she came out of her hiding place, and went hastily to a heap of large stones piled against the wall. High above this heap of stones was a French window opening on to a small verandah, unenclosed, only a railing round it for protection. To the right of this was a large verandah, entirely closed in with jalousies, and apparently unused. The room from which these verandahs abutted, had no other windows on that side.

Nina looked round her and listened attentively. There were lights in the room above, but no sounds. Then she commenced the seemingly hopeless work of removing the stones. The task was easier than it at first appeared; had it not been for fear of noise, she could have done it much quicker. When three or four of the uppermost stones had been put aside, there was a cavity large enough for her to enter. She crept in. It was a flight of steps built in the wall. She sat down on the first step and began to think. She knew where the staircase led to, and there she meant to go, but she wanted to arrange her thoughts a little first. She

tried to go back to the time of her first acquaintance with Claud, and before that too ; to the time when she lived in this very mansion, and walked about its lofty rooms and spacious galleries, a dreaming devotee, and then through all that had occurred since, up to the present moment of her sitting there in the gloom of gathering night. But she got bewildered. Other scenes which she could not recall as belonging to her life, came unbidden, and mingled themselves with the realities which she remembered. Recollections misty, indistinct, of words, conversations, actions, her own, yet not her own, thrust themselves forward, and she could not banish them. Claud was not always Claud, but someone else ; always in the same character regarding herself, yet not the Claud she knew now.

Even she herself seemed to change as this bewildering dream went on. But the same feeling of misery which she experienced in reality pervaded the dream. The same gnawing consciousness of being both sinned against and sinning ; the same unhappy complications, mistakes, terrors ; whether it was herself and Claud, or that other self and that other Claud, that seemed to haunt her. She began to think, "was she herself, or anyone else ?"

And then in a dull semi-consciousness, her mind wandered away to a day which now

seemed ages past, one of her happiest days, when Claud had asked her, "where she got her peerless beauty? Were all the women of her family beautiful as she was?"

And she had answered simply —

"Yes, all; at least she had heard so; for there never was but one daughter born to her house in each generation, and she was always beautiful, and always called Nina."

This haunted her so, that at last she could think of nothing else.

"Am I losing my senses?" she said, pressing her hands upon her burning forehead.

Then with a strong effort she came back to reality and the present time. Sounds in the room above, tramping of feet, loud voices.

"It is time," she said to herself, as if speaking to a third person—"Go."

Obedient to her own command she stood up. With supernatural strength she lifted a large stone and placed it firmly in the cavity, thus concealing the opening but cutting off her own retreat. The staircase was now perfectly dark, but she had seen that the rest of it was clear from stones. The fact was that it had been ordered to be blocked up, but the workmen, with true Italian laziness, had rolled a few stones to the entrance and no more.

Nina stood for a moment quite still, listening. Then she pulled the cowl over her face, drew the dagger from her girdle,

and held it ready in her right hand; with the other hand she gathered her garments about her, and softly, silently, like a shadow, crept up the stairs.

Dust and cobwebs came down upon her head; her feet touched slimy things that moved under them, but she stopped for nothing till she had reached the top and stood in the large enclosed balcony, trembling, shivering, burning; and through the chinks of the jalousies watching the bright lights and figures passing up and down within, and listening to the mingled voices that came floating through the open window of the smaller balcony, and Claud's, loudest, gayest, happiest above them all.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER a few moments of trembling terror, Nina gained courage enough to look about and take some note of her position. The light that poured in a stream from the window of the small balcony shone through the jalousies of the one she was in, and showed her that she stood about two yards from the end of it, which almost joined the French window. Here, then, she saw a possibility of communication. At the prospect of success her energy returned with a feverish impatience to complete the undertaking so strangely commenced, and as yet carried out with strange good fortune. Notwithstanding the fright of the previous day, the night of sleeplessness and terror, the mental agitation, and the immense distance that she had positively walked since noon, she felt not the slightest fatigue; only now and then an unusual dulness of thought, a momentary haze, that spread over her mind, blotting out for the few seconds that it lasted consciousness and memory.

She felt this slightly when she sat down to rest on the steps below; she felt it a second time when she reached the top, and the necessity for immediate exertion was over; and she felt it again now, flitting like a vapour over

her brain, but so swiftly that it was gone almost before she knew it to be there, like a tiny cloud passing over the moon which only shadows half the orb at a time. The door of the verandah leading into the room was not glazed, and while looking at this, and wondering if it were locked, she suddenly lost all recollection of what brought her there; a moment after she remembered. She never stopped to analyse this curious sensation, to guess at the cause, or the consequences it might involve; her only thought was to drive it away, get rid of it on any terms, and for this she continually pressed her hands, now icy cold, to her burning head.

The wine the Priest had given her was a stronger stimulant than she was aware of, and probably intended by him to supply her with more than natural strength, both of mind and body, till she should have reached a place of safety.

During these momentary reveries, or rather chasms in her intellect, her lips moved and she seemed to speak, but was unconscious of it. When she first entered the balcony and fell into the state I describe, she plainly articulated "Forgive me, Father;" but whether the Priest was in her thoughts, or an earthly parent, or a Father higher than all, she herself could never have told.

Softly and cautiously she crept to the end

of the balcony and pressed her face against the *jalousie*, striving in vain to peer into the lighted chamber. It was so close that she distinctly heard fragments of various conversations going on ; jokes and laughter, mingled with scraps of political news, remarks on the weather, family details, &c. Claud's voice joined at intervals in all of these ; but, intently though she listened, she heard nothing that could throw the least light on the absence and silence that had so tormented her. With her face still pressed against the shutter, revolving in her mind this unsettled question, she was startled by the sudden flinging open of one side of the French window, which was partially closed, a shadow came between her and the light, and Claud—Claud himself—stepped on to the small balcony.

Nina had so schooled herself to the suppression of all emotion, that though gasping with mingled hope and fear, she never stirred. But she strung up her energies with stern determination, and watchfully waited her opportunity. When she first caught sight of her lover's face he was smiling : the lingering smile left by some joke passing within ; but as he now stood with the light falling sideways on his handsome features, she saw that the smile quickly died out, and was replaced by a look of gravity—almost care, and even touched with sadness. He

looked older, too—paler, thinner, and there were lines, if not positive wrinkles, about his mouth and eyes, which spoke either of severe illness or mental trouble. It could scarcely be the former, for, judging from the scraps of conversation that had reached her, he had never left Naples or been absent from duty; and if it was the latter, it carried consolation with it, for with a natural egotism she put it down as connected with herself.

Every shade of angry feeling vanished from her heart as she looked at him. As he stood there between the red light from within and the silvery lustre of the moon just showing herself through the trees, his head thrown back, his eyes fixed almost mournfully on the slowly brightening sky, she thought him nobler, handsomer, worthier, than she had ever thought him before, though her opinion had always been that Nature had made one perfect man, and Destiny determined that he should be a Frenchman.

But the time had come that she must act; how should she make her presence known to him? She tried a slight movement of the jalousie—he heard, for he turned his head towards the light, as if he thought that the sound came from within; and then Nina was seized with a sudden panic lest he should call the attention of others to it; so she remained still as death, and in a few moments Claud looked backed again, ap-

parently satisfied that his ears had deceived him. She then decided to pronounce his name in a whisper. The very fact of the whisper would suggest caution, and if she could only attract his attention, without involving that of anyone else, her object was attained. Two minutes of conversation was all that she required; that done, she would wait patiently till the household retired to rest, glide down, and recommence her journey through the lonely streets.

She placed her lips close to the widest crevice she could find, drew a long breath, and had already formed the first letter of his name, when a light step approached, and an opaque body appeared on the scene; a sounding slap on the back was administered to the dreamer on the balcony, and a cheery voice exclaimed —

“Why, Claud, old fellow, I was wondering where you’d got to! Star-gazing, eh? Is it the gloomy sky above, or the gloomy earth below that you find so attractive? Or are you trying to devour the weary hours till you get something more substantial to devour? But I forgot, you are in love, and don’t eat; I wish I were, as the viands seem far enough away; I should like my appetite to be absent too. The fact is, I’m starving!” Then lowering his voice a little, “Are we never to have any supper?”

“Supper,” echoed Claud, “how can you

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speak of it? Who could leave this delicious air and that lovely sky for hot lights and smoking tables? To see the moon rising there is worth a twenty-four hours' fast! For my part, I should not care if supper were delayed till to-morrow morning; I am quite content where I am."

"Of course you are; you are in love, as I said before, hungering and thirsting for your fair one's face, and with no compassion for the fainting wretch who stands beside you. I say, Claud, when did you see her last? Come tell me."

"Who?" said Claud with an impatient jerk.

"Who? Why she, of course. The incomparable she! Is she down in the shrubbery there? You seem to take a great interest in those stunted bushes! Or is she sitting among the stars as someone, in some book, says that somebody is? Or do you feel her sweet presence close beside you at this silent, magic hour?"

"For Heaven's sake, Brandenburg, be quiet do," interrupted Claud, half laughing, half angry. "You have the most inventive genius for foolery I ever met with. You have interrupted me in the middle of a calculation I was making" —

"A calculation? What already? You don't say so! Positively come down to the prose! You must be very far gone indeed,

when you begin to think of how to make the two ends meet. Where did you get to? Housekeeping—so much. Servants' wages—ditto. Clothes—a mere trifle. Food—Oh! that word brings back my agonies! I have eaten nothing since eight o'clock this morning. What is the General after? He has never lifted his nose from those papers since we came in. Keeping us waiting such a time, and after the dance that he led us this afternoon. By-the-bye, what did we go for? Why were we trotted out to that musty little village? It's unreasonable, unbearable; my horse is thoroughly knocked up, I believe he'll die to-morrow; and I, if I wait much longer for supper, shall die to-night. I really must find some means of mending these unhappy matters; I think of preferring charges against the General—unnecessary cruelty, or perhaps" —

"Be quiet, will you," said Claud, seizing him by the arms and shaking him well, "are you mad? The General will hear" —

"Not he," turning and looking into the room, "he's wrapped in his own sweet meditations, varied by an occasional interchange of ideas with his friend and confidant the Snake. What he sees in that man I cannot imagine."

"A useful tool," said Claud in a low voice, "that's all. There's plenty of dirty work to be done just now, and *somebody* must do it.

I, for one, don't feel inclined to soil my fingers, and I think we are all pretty much of the same opinion."

"By dirty work," said Brandenburg, "you mean, I suppose" —

"Oh, spying, informing, ferreting out secrets, and that sort of thing. Telling downright lies occasionally, and being always false to everyone. Which of *us* could do it? The man in there was made for the purpose. He has the eye of a lynx, the head of a serpent, and the heart of a tiger."

"A pretty picture," said Brandenburg, nodding vehemently, "a very pretty picture, and to the life! I see you are not on terms of intimacy with our friend. Has there been any passage of arms between you?"

"Oh! not exactly," said Claud, with a careless toss of the head; "I know that he hates me, and would be only too glad to ruin me if he could; I consider it a compliment. Nevertheless, whenever he nails me with that wicked eye of his, I see a vision of arrest and court-martial."

"Precisely," said the other, earnestly, "I feel with you there. Starved as I am, I could no more eat my supper under that man's eye, than a fly could perpetrate its little meal with a spider looking on. I should fancy the food was poisoned. Do you know," he added, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "what is said of him?"

"No," said Claud, "nothing particular. What?"

"He is reported to be" — the last word was breathed into his companion's ear.

Claud started, horror and disgust in his face.

"Can it be true?" he said.

"I cannot answer for it," returned Brandenburg. "I have only heard it hinted; but from many accompanying circumstances I think it more than likely. I know that he was a hot Revolutionist."

"I wonder," said Claud, after a short silence, "how he got to his present position."

Brandenburg shrugged his shoulders.

"To use your own words, by making himself a useful tool. He spends his life doing what an ignorant man *couldn't*, and a gentleman *wouldn't* do; but though a useful tool, I consider him a dangerous one. He has a wild-beast instinct for blood, and some day will turn on his masters."

"True," said Claud thoughtfully, "I have an antipathy to that man, which seems to foreshadow some harm that he will yet do me."

"You?" said Brandenburg. "Absurd! You are far above his mark. Set him on these wretched Italians, and he'll worry them to death; but I don't think he'll try that little game on any of *us*. Yes," he continued sententiously, "I consider the two great faults in our chief's character are, his friendship for

that man, and want of consideration for the appetites of his subalterns. I declare, talking of the one has deprived me of the other. The very thought of him is nauseous. Bah! We'll discuss the unsavoury subject no longer." And leaning his arms on the balcony he began humming an air.

Enveloped in night and silence, had Nina stood in her concealment, listening to this conversation. A thousand alternations of hope and fear had possessed her, but on the whole she was radiantly happy. She no longer doubted that some strong, secret reason, was the cause of Claud's apparent desertion. His changed looks, his companion's hints and jokes on what was evidently no new subject, his embarrassed manner—she took it all as a joyful certainty. But yet she *must* wait and speak to him. And how she longed for an opportunity, for now she began to feel a dreadful weariness of mind and body, a wild craving for rest, and thought with a shudder of the length of way she must yet traverse before reaching her refuge; to say nothing of the difficulty and danger of escaping from her present position, and perhaps hours yet to stand there, with stiffening joints, and aching head, and possibly not succeed after all. She could not even relieve her cramped limbs by any movement, for the two men were so

close that the least sound would have reached them. But she never lost courage. There was nothing for it but to wait patiently, and bravely seize the first opportunity.

Just as she came to this decision, Brandenburg turned round again and spoke.

"I say, Claud?"

"Well!"

"You haven't told me her name, you know."

"Whose name?"

"The name of the picture that you were seen kissing energetically the other day."

Nina started so violently that she slightly jarred the shutter against which she was leaning. What picture! Whose picture! No artist had ever transferred *her* fair face to canvas or ivory.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Claud, turning abruptly, and nearly upsetting his tormentor.

"My dear fellow don't knock me over the balcony. You needn't be alarmed, the person who witnessed the—the—little circumstance I allude to, is a discreet man, and only mentioned the fact to a select circle of acquaintances. I am his intimate friend, so he told me more than he told anyone else. I am not quite certain, but I *think* he said the complexion was fair. Am I right?"

"To be sure," laughed Claud, "fair as a lily."

"And the hair, pray correct me if I make any mistake, I fancy the hair was mentioned as golden?"

"Well, you are a little out there," said Claud, evidently bent on turning the enemy's flank, "it is not *precisely* what I should call golden."

"Ah! to be sure. Of course you are a better judge. You have seen it more closely. But at any rate it was a lovely face."

"Oh! a lovely face beyond all doubt," echoed Claud, "a very lovely face."

"What is the face under discussion?" said a third party, joining the two in the balcony. "Pray tell me, I am a connoisseur in faces."

The new-comer was a remarkably tall man, fully ten years older than either of the other two. His great height would have made him ungraceful had he not been well-proportioned, but being particularly so, had quite the contrary effect. He was handsome too, though rather lined and worn, and had a listless, cynical expression, contradicted, however, by his eyes, which were light brown, large, honest, and kind.

"Go on," he said, as neither replied, "what face?"

He addressed himself to Claud, who answered with an expressive shrug —

"I really can't tell; ask Brandenburg, he seems to know all about it."

"Oh! Brandenburg," said the tall man turning his languid head in that direction, "I know *his* ideas on most subjects. To him a supper means—something to eat and drink; his ideal of beauty would be a petticoat and long hair; and his total of a face comprised in three slits and an excrescence. Well, Bran, what about the face?"

"Don't ask me," retorted that individual, "it's Claud's hidden beauty we're speaking of, he ought to know best."

"Claud's affair, is it? Ah! that makes a difference. Claud has some taste, he does know a face when he sees one. Is the beauty discovered then?"

"Not exactly," said Brandenburg, with a malicious laugh, "but almost. We've got as far as her picture, which Claud sleeps on at night, and wears in the day."

"Claud, is that true?" said the tall man, gravely.

Claud smiled; a smile that might mean anything.

"Suppose that I have a picture," he said, "I don't see what it proves."

"What it proves?" cried Brandenburg, "why everything. In the first place that you're in love."

"I don't see it," said Claud. "How do you know that it isn't a sister?"

"We don't generally wear our sisters' pictures on our hearts, and kiss them ve-

hemently when we think nobody by," said Brandenburg drily.

"And has anyone seen the picture?" asked the tall man.

"Brandenburg pretends that he has," laughed Claud, "and near enough to distinguish hair and complexion, but you know how far his report may be trusted."

"Oh! it's only Brandenburg's account, then. My good Claud, do you believe he knows what a picture is? I don't. Was it an oil-painting, Bran, six feet square, in a gilt frame? I know that's your only conception of a picture."

"No," thundered the insulted Bran, with imperturbable good-humour, "it wasn't square at all, it was round—oval, at least—and only a few inches long; and didn't Claude take a time looking at it. He can't deny that."

The tall man looked inquiringly at Claud.

"A pocket brush," said the latter, answering the look, "with a glass at the back; quite near enough for Bran."

"Just so," said the tall man. "Do you think, Bran, that you ever saw a picture in your life that you could remember five minutes afterwards?"

"Did I ever? That reminds me. I saw a picture this very day that I shall never forget so long as I live."

"Is it possible? Please then to describe it for our benefit."

"Well," said Brandenburg, with twinkling eyes, "in the first place *it was an oil-painting, six feet square, in a gilt frame.*"

"I thought so," retorted the tall man. "Go on."

"I'm going on. Stop though—I must tell you first how I came to see it. There's a mystery attached to it."

The tall man folded his arms, leant his head against the window-frame, and closed his eyes.

"What marvels do I hear!" he ejaculated. "Brandenburg mixed up with a picture and a mystery! Proceed, Bran, I entreat you, I am on the tiptoe of expectation."

"I hope it's not a fatiguing position," said Brandenburg, lifting his eyes to the reclining head, very much as he would have gazed at a distant star, "and that you're generally comfortable up there, for it will be some little time before I can fetch you down."

"I'm doing the best I can under the circumstances," returned the other, "pray get on."

"I will," said the narrator. "Well, to begin, I came this morning to the General on duty, sent in my name, and received a gracious reply that he would be able to see me in about an hour and a half; meantime I was to wait. Pleasant, wasn't it? So I

looked into all the rooms, and out of all the windows, and tried to count the flies, and devised various other modes of passing the time—all failures; and at last I drifted hopelessly into the gallery. There I found an old fellow mounted on a ladder, brushing and dusting at the frames and cornices. Seeing, I suppose, my utter inability to amuse myself, he came down from his perch, and offered to show me the beauties of the collection. I consented, and we travelled round the walls together. His explanations were not as intelligible as they might have been, for *my* lips refuse to accommodate themselves to the sweet southern liquids, and *he* seemed most lamentably ignorant of our beautiful and universal language; but we managed question and answer somehow. When I had seen all, and was about to leave, he stopped me, and first making me understand that he was charmed with my great knowledge and perfect appreciation of these works of art"—here all three indulged in an explosion of laughter—"said that he would now, as a great mark of esteem, allow me to see the gem—the wonder—the miraculous possession of the former occupants of this palace.

"Of course I was grateful, and followed. The old fellow went groping with his hands about the wall in a most extraordinary

manner. I thought I must have misunderstood him, when suddenly he touched a spring, or a bolt, or something, and the stones began to crack and part, and fold over each other in some mysterious fashion, and at last there was a great open niche and a black curtain inside. Then the old wizard began to cross himself, mouth and mumble, and roll his eyes about, and at last beckoned to me to come up close; and then he drew back the curtain. Heaven and earth! how I started. At first I positively took it for a human figure, such as we read are sometimes walled up in those abominations of the earth called nunneries. And I could fancy any wretched creature wearing just such a look upon her face while the bricks were being piled round her."

"Then," said Claud, "it was a woman."

"From the face I should have thought so," said Brandenburg, "but the dress was that of a monk, apparently a boy about fifteen. And yet there was another contradiction too, for a part of his white gown was turned back, making visible a red garment more like the petticoats the country women about here wear, than any monkish clothing. The hands, too, were feminine, white and tiny, though certainly a monk's might be that for all the work they do, and one of them held a weapon of some kind with a most deter-

mined looking grasp. But all that is nothing. It was the face. Oh! such a face! Such an awful face!"

"Wicked?" said Claud.

"Ugly?" said the tall man.

"Neither," said Brandenburg. "The face was beautiful! The most wonderful collection of lovely features that I ever saw. Pale—very pale—but such carved crimson lips, such rounded cheeks, such eye-brows, such a magnificent forehead, with the hair rolling and rippling back in shining ebony masses. But the eyes! Merciful powers! The artist must have been possessed by a legion of fiends when he painted them. Large, dark, lustrous, but full of fury, hatred, bitterness, malice, cruelty, and yet strange to say, with a woful, despairing, imploring look, that would make some eyes—not mine, Claud's, perhaps—overflow to look at them. Well, I was so astonished and petrified at this wonderful vision, that I could neither speak nor move, and scarcely breathe, but when the first bewilderment passed off, I was all curiosity to know the history attached to this extraordinary picture, for I saw plainly enough that there *was* a history. And then for the first time I chafed at my inability to understand thoroughly my rusty old friend's explanations. But as far as I could make out this boy or girl—it certainly *was* a girl's face—

lived centuries ago, and was very badly treated by some person or persons unknown. The consequence was that the young gentleman, as we'll suppose him to be, made a hasty and uncalled for retreat from this wicked world, quite on his own account; a step which I fancy he has repented of ever since, as he appears to take every possible opportunity of returning. Whether he finds the change not so agreeable as he expected, or has still a little business to finish down here, I am not sufficiently well-informed to say.

"But my guide assured me on his word as an honest man—which, of course, was quite conclusive—and making horrible faces all the time, that when a Castellano is about to die, our friend in the white gown, who it seems is an ancestor, is to be seen gliding along these halls and galleries, or standing motionless under the arches and doorways, sometimes silent, sometimes shrieking frightfully. But the sign is infallible; if a Castellano dies, he is sure to appear—if he appears, a Castellano is sure to die. If it is the head of the house about to depart, the shrieks, I was told, are awful. Sometimes even he has been known to speak to a foolhardy adventurer, who has dared the interview. I ventured to enquire of what nature was the communication so made? And the old gentleman, quaking in every limb, replied that that was never known, for any who had

survived such conversation had remained a moping idiot for life ; the which I can quite believe, always supposing that he were not one before.

“ My new acquaintance implored me, therefore, as I valued my senses, never to risk so dangerous an experiment, but should I be so unfortunate as to see the figure in any direction that I was about to take, to turn at once, and go as fast as my limbs would carry me in an opposite one, which I most emphatically assured him that I would certainly do ! I then asked how the picture came to be painted ? Surely he had not sat for his likeness in that curious dress and attitude, and with that fiendish expression of face ? Here again was another strange story. After the departure of the ill-used young man, an artist, one of the family, having expressed great regret that the portrait gallery was incomplete without a likeness of that fated scion of the house, suddenly, at midnight, received a visit, either from the departed himself, or something worse in his shape, who commanded that he should be portrayed precisely as he stood, then and there, and so complete the family line. The artist, who, I suppose, did not find himself equal to the occasion, in great terror obeyed ; painted that picture, went mad, and died ! Quite the natural result, I should think, of such a labour.

"Well, when I had looked long enough at this marvel of painting, I thanked my guide for the pleasant entertainment he had given me, in the way that I thought would be most acceptable to him, and prepared to depart. I wanted to see him shut up the wall again, but he called my attention to another portrait a little lower down, and while I was looking at it, closed everything, and led me so artfully on, that for my life when I looked round I could not tell which side or end of the gallery the secret opening had been. I was obliged to go, for the General sent for me then, and I had not time to make a minute inspection; but I mean to some day. However, should any of us meet such a figure as I have described anywhere about this house, we shall know now, especially if he groans, that the rebel Castellano will die before twenty-four hours are over."

"My dear Brandenburg," said the tall man, "you have really told us a wonderful tale, and quite taken my breath away. Pardon me for having so shamefully underrated your appreciative powers. Nevertheless, I should like to see this miraculous picture myself."

"I don't believe you ever will," said Brandenburg. "Old Crusty wouldn't show it to everyone I know. You see he took a great fancy to me; my interesting appearance and charming manners are irresistible."

Here again all three shouted with laughter, for truth to tell the speaker was short, square, and only redeemed from positive ugliness by a fine set of teeth, and a comical good-humour beaming from his broad face.

"Well," said Claud, "I'm not at all anxious to meet the ghost, with such an expression of countenance as you describe. I shall certainly retreat before the enemy. Chevelure, you don't believe in fiend or angel, what would you do?"

"I?" said the tall man languidly, "well, I'll tell you when I know myself. I don't think he'll ever appear to me; those spectres are wonderfully discriminating, so it would be a waste of energy to arrange matters beforehand."

"At any rate," said Brandenburg, "when he *does* appear, one good will result from it. A trouble the less on our hands. We shall know that Castellano will be safe in the other world before the sun sets again on this one."

He spoke the concluding words in a loud tone, and was taken up by a voice from within the room, that said abruptly —

"Who speaks of Castellano's death?"

"There," said Claud in a whisper, "I told you the General would hear."

"I don't care," said Brandenburg.

Then stepping briskly into the room, he answered —

"It was I, General. I was repeating a story that I heard in your gallery this morning, concerning a dead-and-gone monk—at least, a thing in a monk's frock, with a beautiful, pale, woman's face, and an assassin's dagger, some unhappy ancestor of the Castellani, who is supposed to haunt this goodly mansion, howling, I beg his pardon, moaning I should say, for some hours before any of the family take their last journey. Doubtless he intends it as a delicate compliment to the expected guest—he comes to meet him half way."

"Verily," said the General with a grim smile, "then he should be here to-night, for before sunrise to-morrow his last descendant will have joined him in the Land of Shadows."

"What? When?" exclaimed a dozen voices. "How do you mean, General?"

"I mean," said the General, bringing out his words with slow distinctness, "that that arch rebel and traitor, Lorenzo, Duke Castellano, will, at daybreak to-morrow, die a felon's death. There is neither doubt nor indecision about it. His plots and schemes are all over, by this time he has received his last shrift, and the best thing I can say for him now is, Heaven rest his soul."

In the momentary silence that followed this startling announcement a strange sound made itself audible in the room; a sort of wild, gusty sigh, which ceased abruptly,

leaving an oppressive stillness behind it. Everyone looked enquiringly at everyone.

"It was the wind," said Brandenburg, "hark ! how it is rising."

And certainly at that moment the breeze swept sharply round the corner of the house, making a singing sound as it passed.

"But, General," said the man whom Claud had called Chevelure, "may we not hear the details of this unexpected news that you give us?"

"Yes," said the General, "there is no longer any necessity for keeping it secret. We have for some time known that Castellano meditated a descent on the coast with a few desperate men, and we could easily have taken them all red-handed, and strung them up on their native trees ; but the King was anxious to avoid all bloodshed ; indeed, he would have saved the rebel himself, had it been practicable, but that was out of the question. So his one life is to suffice for all. Castellano is betrayed, betrayed by his own people, by the very men whom he insanely perils his life to benefit. These vile Italians would sell their chance of Heaven for a dollar. Everything has been prepared for days past. Villeneuve and two hundred picked men have surrounded his retreat since the morning ; it is close to the village where we rode this afternoon. I went ostensibly to inspect a powder magazine, in reality to meet

a scout, who told me that the work was done. Castellano was completely in Villeneuve's hands, and he was only waiting till nightfall to send in his men, seize the leader, and, under cover of darkness, let the rest escape, according to the King's orders. To-morrow morning, as soon as it is light enough to take aim, he will be shot like a dog. I am told that he is the last of his line, so if his spiritual ancestor wishes again to visit this lower earth he had better do it to-night, for he'll not have another opportunity. With Castellano dies, too, the last hope of these miserable rebels. So perish all the Emperor's enemies. Long live the Emperor!"

The General ceased speaking, and all present commenced at once with eager remarks and questionings; but were cut short by the most awful sound that ever struck on human ears. It seemed to rise in the midst of them as if the being who uttered it were standing invisible among them. A dreadful, unearthly cry! The yell of a demon, the wail of a lost soul, the shriek of a tortured child, which was it? What was it? It was each and all. It seemed to pierce the stone floor; it eddied round the walls; it mounted to the ceiling; it came down again, and renewed itself as from an unfathomable gulf of sound; long—loud—piercing. There was no mistake, no fancy, no possible doubt. A voice of hatred and

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revenge ; a voice of wild despair ; a voice of helpless agony ; all mixed, and mingled, and fused in one mass of terrific sound, as if the gates of hell had been for a moment opened, and the dwellers there had made themselves heard upon the earth. A sound to curdle the blood in any living veins, and send it freezing back to strangle the heart.

Not a cheek but was white as death. Not an eye but dilated in glassy terror. So horrible was the cry, that it seemed as if it would never end, though in reality two seconds was the utmost that it lasted.

Each man fancied that it commenced close to his elbow, and that none in the room heard the full extent of its horror as he did.

They remained like statues in whatever position the sound had caught them ; some with a hand half raised, or an arm extended ; some in careless lounging attitudes, now stiff and grotesque, with livid faces surmounting the apparently easy body.

The General sat at the head of a long table covered with papers ; he was leaning forward, in the act of throwing some letters to the other end ; so he remained, one hand grasping the arm of his chair, the other extended as far as possible over the table. He was an old man, grey headed, and seemed in weak health, or else worn with mental trouble. The only sign of life in the whole assemblage was a momentary glance, full of

ghastly meaning, exchanged between the three men who had stood on the balcony.

The sound ceased at last; the very echo died away; and a silence as of the grave itself succeeded to that awful cry. They still remained motionless; life suddenly checked was slow to resume its powers.

Presently slight movements and some long-drawn breaths gave sign of returning animation. The tall man, Chevelure, was the first to recover his speech.

"What could it be?" he said in a subdued voice.

"What could it be?" echoed Brandenburg; "it came from this side of the room, I am certain."

"Indeed," said another quite at the opposite end, "I am convinced that it rose here."

Claud said nothing. His mind was revolving strange fancies.

A man in plain clothes, who was sitting near the General, now lifted his head and spoke. His face was bad—hard, cruel, and treacherous. He had a soft voice, fluent words, an educated manner, and not one trace of a true gentleman about him. He looked scared like the rest, and a foxy twinkle still lingered in his deep-set eyes.

"It is probable," he said in a purring voice. "Do you not think, General, that there may be some trick?"

"Trick?" said the General, "in what

way? Who could or would play such a trick, and for what purpose?"

"Nay," said the purring voice, "I only suggested; otherwise it seems so very unaccountable."

"Unaccountable indeed," said the General, leaning his head on his hand. "Could it possibly come from outside? Could it be" —

He was interrupted by a deep, gasping sigh, such as we are accustomed to hear only from beds of the dying when the last solemn moment is at hand. The very breath that accompanied the sigh was audible.

Everyone started at the same moment, as if they all held by an electric chain.

"It is here, in this room, in the midst of us," said one, whose blanched face and quivering lips told how thoroughly he believed his own words.

"It is true," said Claud softly. "Whatever made that sound is as near to us as we are to each other."

Again a pause, and then Brandenburg stepped forward.

"General," he said, "the story that I was telling just now has more details than I thought necessary to relate. That gallery there"—pointing to the closed verandah—"has something to do with it. If you knew all, I think you would decide to leave the room. It can scarcely be called cowardly,"

he added, trying to smile, "to retire in good order, when we cannot even tell who our enemy is, or what force he possesses."

As he spoke, all eyes turned to the door leading into the verandah, which had not before been noticed, and now seemed to possess a mysterious attraction.

The General reflected a moment, then stood up, pale, calm, and brave.

"No," he said, "I have fought too much with flesh and blood to fear shadows. I will open that door and see what the gallery contains. I believe myself that nothing is there, but if anyone would rather not be present, let him leave the room first. I know my officers are brave men where earthly enemies are concerned; it is no reproach to them if they decline to engage with a supernatural foe."

Not a foot stirred to depart, but Claud whispered hurriedly in Chevelure's ear —

"Prevent him; you have influence. He is an old man, and not strong. He might receive a shock that he would never recover."

Chevelure advanced to the table.

"General," he said, "we cannot let you do the unpleasant work; we are all younger and stronger. You know I am not easily shocked; let me unbar the door and search the balcony. I think I can hold my own against Satan himself; and if any trickster

should be secreted there, which is not at all likely, I promise that he shall not escape without feeling the weight of my arm."

"Not so, Chevelure," said the old soldier. "If there is nothing to apprehend, well and good; if there is, I ought to be the first to face it. If anyone wishes to leave the room let him hold up his hand."

He paused; not a finger was raised.

"Good," he said. "Cowards fear both heaven and hell; brave men neither."

He walked to the verandah, followed closely by the whole group.

The bolts were rusty, but with a little perseverance yielded. The latch only remained. For one moment the General hesitated, then boldly raised it and pulled back the door, which opened inwardly.

At the same moment every head was stretched forward, every eye fixed on the opening, and every voice uttered a cry of terror that baffles description.

There, relieved against the darkness, stood the white, monkish figure; the cowl partly fallen back, the head bent slightly forward, the face so beautiful, but ashy pale and corpse-like; the teeth clenched, as, with rage or pain; the eyes widely staring, but fixed, and full of a nameless horror; and in one hand the glittering dagger, its point turned towards the ground.

Had Nina wished to escape, she might

have done it easily, for not one present but would have recoiled before her, as they never would have done from basilisk or tiger. But she had no such thought. When she uttered that cry of agony, sense entirely left her. Had power remained with her to think over what she had heard, she must have died outright. Better, perhaps, if she had !

Possibly some vague intention of revenge or escape had brought her from the end of the balcony to the door, or, finding the conversation transferred to the inside of the room, she had come there to listen more easily. But whatever it was, with that last sobbing sigh the very power of motion seemed to have forsaken her. There she stood, rigid and unconscious, like a creature suddenly smitten with catalepsy, and there stood the awe-struck group within, gazing with a terrified fascination, as if they expected her to advance and blast them with lightning from those unearthly eyes.

For a few moments both remained in the same position—speechless, motionless ; then the rigid tension of Nina's muscles began to give way, her fingers relaxed their hold, and with a loud clang the dagger fell upon the stones !

CHAPTER V.

THE ring of the metal roused the spell-bound assembly. Brandenburg started forward.

"That at least was a sound of earth," he exclaimed, "and with your leave, General" —he finished the sentence by darting into the balcony and laying his hand upon Nina's unresisting shoulder. "Here it is," he shouted triumphantly; "I've got it, firm flesh and blood, as substantial a phantom as ever I met with. Forward, good youth, forward; into the light if it please your ghostliness. Come, let us see thee without thy domino."

And, dragging forward the passive figure, he began pulling and tugging at the cowl and gown, which, quickly falling off, displayed the Contadina's red petticoat and braided tresses.

At once every voice exclaimed —

"Why, it is a woman!"

Brandenburg stepped back a few paces, gazing with a kind of comic dismay at the revelation his own hands had made.

"I verily believe," he stammered at last, "that Sathanas is playing us a trick still, and that is the picture walked out of its frame."

Nina still stood, motionless and unconscious, where Brandenburg had placed her; but the stony rigidity had melted from her face, the ghastly stare was gone from her eyes, leaving only a startled, appealing look, inexpressibly touching in eyes so large and lustrous.

Her face was still utterly colourless, but it was the pallor, and almost the transparency, of wax—all save the lips, to which the crimson tint was rapidly returning. Her hair, instead of passing in a classical line across her forehead, her usual mode of wearing it, had been pushed and rolled back by the Priest, the better to aid her disguise, and, being loosened by the removal of the head-dress, fell half down her neck like a heap of shining jet.

As she stood there in a repose so unnatural, the bright light bringing out every detail of her extraordinary beauty, habited in a costume so eccentric, that it was bewildering to think how and why it had been put together, no wonder that the spectators still stood aloof, gazing at her with an astonishment little short of awe.

For, though Brandenburg had so decidedly pronounced her to be flesh and blood, she scarcely looked it. The fatigue, fasting, and agitation of the last twenty-four hours would, at a more advanced age, have made her appear a haggard spectre; but first and beau-

tiful youth can scarcely look haggard, except under very long pressure, and the effect on Nina was only an ethereal delicacy of form and colouring, seldom seen except in pictures of fay, sprite, or naiad.

To all she was an object of unbounded and perplexing curiosity, but tenfold to the three men who had heard the entire story of the picture. Brandenburg was literally aghast at this sudden embodiment of his own disjointed account of what he had seen and heard. Chevelure, who only spoke truth when he called himself a connoisseur in faces, was startled at the seeming realization of that dream of perfection which had haunted him through life; and though, as Claud had said, he believed neither in fiend nor angel, yet the beautiful humanity before him stirred in his heart feelings which he had believed to be long ago dead, and buried in forgotten graves. It would be impossible to trace the thousand thoughts that flashed through his mind, and which he sorted, arranged, and laid ready, to be connected afterwards by a few as yet undiscovered links.

Anyone looking at him would see that some dominant principle of his nature was beginning to assert itself. His brown eyes were full of earnest light; the look of cynical indifference had vanished from his face; he stood up with folded arms and quiet

demeanour, but with an air of determination that seemed both able and willing, if need were, to do battle with an army. He never spoke, or moved his eyes for more than a moment from Nina's face.

And Claud—how did the unexpected apparition affect him? When the disguise fell off, and the beautiful face was turned to the light, after one moment of bewildered uncertainty he recognised her—recognised her with a thrill of dismay and terror, taking in at a glance all the unfortunate, perhaps fatal, consequences, that might ensue to them both from her presence there.

Though ignorant how or why she had concealed herself in the closed and barred balcony, utterly in the dark as to the cause of the cry she had uttered, yet he jumped at once to the right conclusion, that he himself was the object she sought. What was to be done? His first impulse was to come forward, proclaim his knowledge of her, take to himself any blame that might attach to it, and urge his right to remove her to some safe asylum till she should recover sufficiently to give an account of herself and be restored to her friends. But then came the second thought. *Could* he take all the blame; would he even be believed? And a shuddering anticipation of Brandenburg's wretched jokes, and Chevelure's scoffing wisdom, determined him to remain apparently as ignorant

of her antecedents as the rest of them. But then again, could he leave her in that helpless state to be examined and judged by a code of laws and feelings which he well knew would never touch the real reasons of her conduct? Better at any rate proclaim himself a friend, ready to stand by her under all circumstances, than leave her unassisted to the mercy of such pitiless jurymen. And then coming to this decision he suddenly remembered that he had promised, sworn, never to recognize her in the presence of others; and he could not forget how thoroughly in earnest she had been when exacting this promise.

Unhappy Claud! His brain whirled, his mind became a chaos; after all his determinations to say and do this and that, he ended by neither saying nor doing anything. He remained silent, half-concealed by one or two who pressed in front of him; but had not the universal attention been rivetted on to one object his agitation must have been observed. As it was, two pairs of eyes scanned him for a moment, and thence drew their own conclusions; and, fortunately for him, though one glance was evil and vindictive enough, the other was honest, penetrating, and full of interest and compassion.

The hum of voices had commenced again in murmurs of astonishment, admiration, perplexity, and superstitious fear. Even the

General himself, though recovered from the first shock, said nothing beyond a few broken ejaculations. Brandenburg, as usual, was the first to make himself heard.

"Who and what can she be?" he exclaimed, looking ruefully at a little band of scarlet ribbon which had tied up some portion of Nina's hair, and in pulling off the cowl had fallen upon his arm. "Is she alive or dead? Living creatures don't look like that; and ghosts don't wear these things"—holding up the ribbon. "And if she was dead she could not stand upright. She must be in a fit of some kind, and I feel as if I had done it somehow."

Then he walked up and gently touched her arm.

"Do speak, mademoiselle; or, if you are dumb, nod. Move something—look at somebody—not me if you don't like—one of the others—a good-looking one. Here, Claud, do come forward, women always look at you—try to make her move her eyes."

But Claud never stirred, nor did Nina.

"She's not very warm," continued Brandenburg, feeling the arm that he held; "but not cold enough for a corpse. I wonder if she has any pulse," and then clumsily trying to find the right place he was struck by the beauty of the hand, which lay like a morsel of alabaster in his own large brown paw.

"She has lovely fingers, any way," he

said, lifting them gently, as if he expected them to break or melt, "and features to match," raising his eyes to the face, which was every moment growing softer and more human. "I don't feel any pulse here; I wonder if it is in the other wrist," and dropping the one he held he went round and took up the other, but suddenly stopping in the search for a pulse exclaimed, "*that* doesn't look much like a peasant, or a monk either," holding up to view one finger of the captive hand, which displayed a magnificent ring.

The diamonds in it flashed and sparkled like miniature suns, and two ruby hearts, which formed part of the device, glowed crimson fire.

Claud had watched with mortification and uneasiness Brandenburg's free and easy examination of the unconscious Nina, and to see him now inquisitively picking out every little fact that might lead to her detection was almost too much for human patience. To have knocked Bran down would have been an immense relief to his feelings, but one, unfortunately, in which he could not indulge, but having mentally apostrophized him as "a prying idiot," great was his satisfaction when the General's voice made itself heard, saying in most authoritative tones —

"Brandenburg, let that young lady alone. Be good enough to place yourself at the other end of the room. Gentlemen, all of

you, stand back. This is my affair ; I will question her."

All fell back a few steps. The General placed his chair exactly opposite to the still motionless figure.

"Mademoiselle," he said, bending forward till his eyes fairly looked into hers, "pray attend to me. We do not wish to frighten you—far from it. Reassure yourself. I am willing to believe that some strange accident has brought you here. Only explain, and I will myself take care that you are safely restored to your home, or wherever you wish to go."

Still Nina made no sign, though a faint spasmodic twitching might be discerned about her mouth.

The General looked round uneasily.

"Really," he said, "I don't feel certain—she seems in a peculiar state. In a sudden return of consciousness she might fall ; someone had better stand—La Serpe"—to the man in plain clothes—"will you move nearer to"—

He was interrupted by Chevelure.

"Allow me, General. I have seen a case of this kind before ; I shall know if she requires help," and he stepped forward and placed himself beside Nina.

La Serpe, the secretary, now came up, and darting a furtive, malignant glance at Chevelure, began whispering in the General's

ear. The latter nodded once or twice, but a little impatiently.

"Yes, perhaps, by-and-bye," he said; then turned again to Nina.

"Now, mademoiselle," he continued, speaking very kindly, "I entreat you to try and answer me. If you do not understand French we will find someone who speaks your own language; but give some sign at least that you hear me," and he held out his hand impressively.

Nina moved slightly; she turned her face a little; lifted one arm as if trying to raise it to her head, but failed; opened and shut her eyes rapidly, and for a moment a ray of intelligence shot into them, but died away, leaving her passive as before.

"What is to be done?" said the General hopelessly to Chevelure. "Perhaps we ought to summon a surgeon."

Chevelure opposed this measure strongly.

"She is coming to herself by degrees," he said; "better so than too suddenly."

"Meantime," said the General, "we might find some clue about her. La Serpe, I fancy you have the lightest hand among us; search mademoiselle—gently mind. See if you can find any papers, letters, direction, intimation of any kind as to her belongings."

This was too much for Claud; he started forward and began to speak, but, encountering a peculiar glance from Chevelure, stopped.

"By-the-bye, General," said the latter, "she dropped something, you remember, in the balcony; that might give some information."

"True," said the General; "I had forgotten it. A weapon of some kind I think. Look, La Serpe, you will be sure to find it."

The Secretary retreated into the balcony.

"Also," continued Chevelure, "we may as well examine her dress."

"Nothing there," taking up the monk's gown, shaking it and throwing it down again; "perhaps here; these red petticoats have always capacious pockets, I believe."

He slipped his hand adroitly into the opening and produced in a moment two articles.

"This is all," he said, holding up a sealed paper and a handkerchief. The General took them. He first unfolded the handkerchief. Such a handkerchief surely never before came out of a peasant girl's pocket. Of the finest cambric, superbly embroidered, and in one corner a sort of shield, surmounted by the same device as on her ring, two hearts united by a coronet, and enclosing the initials A de C.

The General shook his head as he looked at it; and glanced up at the owner and back again to the delicate fabric, doubt and uneasiness in every line of his face.

"There is some queer mystery here,"

he said. "I wish we could fathom it. This device is not altogether unfamiliar to me; I cannot remember just now what I have heard about it. That girl is intentionally disguised I can see; a double disguise, too, for she is no peasant. I fear there is more meaning in it than I thought." He took up the letter and looked at it. "Why, what is this? No direction but a number of scratches on the outside."

At this moment the Secretary returned, holding the dagger which Nina had dropped.

"This is all that I can find, General; a curious little weapon enough, very curious, and of ancient workmanship it seems to me."

The General took it, turned it up and down this way and that.

"A foolish little thing," he said, laying it on the table, "more a toy than a weapon. Let us see about the letter. What does this mean, La Serpe? No direction, but seven long strokes and a seal big enough for a despatch to the Emperor. Is it a letter, or what?"

"Perhaps the inside might tell," suggested the Secretary.

"To be sure; yes, I will break the seal. It is to be hoped that this is no private correspondence of mademoiselle"—darting for a moment a look of suspicion among the

group of officers at the other end of the room —“as she can give no account of herself I must gain information any way I can.”

But before breaking the seal he glanced up again at Nina, whose face had gained so much of colour and expression that she almost seemed to answer his look.

“Surely, young lady, you can understand me now. A word is sufficient. Was it accident or design that brought you here?”

Still Nina was speechless.

“She *will* not answer,” said the General irritably. “I believe she could if she chose.”

“The poor thing is half dead with terror,” said a compassionate voice from the crowd; “most likely it is some piece of masquerading; she has got into the wrong house and couldn’t get out again.”

“This is not Carnival time,” said the General coldly. “Well, I must see what this paper contains.”

With a penknife he cut round the seal, preserving the latter unbroken. As he read his face grew dark, and by the time he had reached the end was black as thunder. When he had finished he held it out to the Secretary.

“Read that La Serpe, there’s more mischief here than I thought for.”

With eagerness the Secretary read aloud :

“DEAR AND FAITHFUL SON,

“I send you herewith a precious charge, no other than the daughter of our illustrious Chief, who, for reasons which she will herself explain, is forced to abandon the refuge which has hitherto sheltered her. I send her alone, for I dare not desert my post even for a reason so important. The time is ripe; the blow is about to fall. The usurpers lull themselves in security, they think their councils unfathomable, their plans like the deep sea; but the dead walls have told their secrets, and women and children shall laugh at their shallow contrivings. I have yet a mission to confide to the noble child who comes to you; I pray you in all things to aid her with advice, help, and whatever money she may require. Young and tender as she is, her boldness, energy, and powers of endurance are remarkable. Whatever hour of the night she may arrive let it be supposed by your household that your excellent wife's young relative has unexpectedly been enabled to carry out her first arrangement. The disguise you can easily account for in these lawless times. I will write more lengthily at some future date.

“I know the worth of the hands into which I commit this treasure, and I do it without fear. Adieu my friend; I pray that Blessed Mary and her Son may

strengthen and bless you in the great work,
and all other good, and I subscribe myself
now as always,

“Your Father spiritually

“And in affection,

“FRANCESCO.”

At the reading of this unmistakable document a dead silence fell on the whole assembly. The Secretary's eyes emitted fierce twinkles of joy. Claud's hands turned cold, his heart sank like lead; the vague evils he had foreboded began to loom up in hideous, palpable forms. Nina's whole existence had always been to him a mystery. What if her careful reticence really shrouded some horrible secret? But that thought was dismissed in a moment. His clearer judgment quickly saw that the true danger lay in a miserable coincidence of circumstances. He had always seen that she was living a disguised life; this of itself would explain much of the suspicious wording of the letter; but how was he to give the explanation? The attempt would only bring down grave suspicions on himself, and in no way exonerate her. Chevelure still stood beside Nina watching her attentively. Within the last few minutes he had drawn a little nearer, for she had moved once or twice, turned her head, and rocked slightly as if not securely balanced.

Brandenburg's voice thrust itself as usual into the midst of the general dismay, with the often repeated "Who and what can she be?" and was proceeding with his usual mode of reasoning when a thundering "Silence" from the General brought him to a full stop.

"Gentlemen," said the latter, looking round and speaking with angry vehemence, very different to his former quiet tone, "I read in all your faces the confirmation of my own suspicions. I thought it once before, and dismissed the idea as impossible; it forced itself upon me again and again; I am now convinced, whether as an accomplice or a tool I cannot take upon myself to say, but whichever it is, the fact remains the same. That woman is a spy!"

He pointed with his hand towards her and spoke with passionate earnestness. For a moment not a dissent was heard. The accusation found an echo in the hearts of nearly all present. But then despair did for Claud what he had better have done for himself before. He took his courage in both hands and walked boldly forward.

"General," he said, "pardon me, but I do not agree with you. Consider her youth, her delicate appearance, the evidences of luxury and high breeding about her, and, more than all, the state she is in at present. None but madmen would employ so unfit an

instrument. Of what good would she be. Liable every moment to discovery, unable to make her escape, and utterly useless for any report, or the learning of any secrets."

"I admit that there is reason in what you say," replied the General in somewhat milder tones, "but on the other side there is more. A spy is not necessarily without human feelings, and fatigue, fasting, or any violent emotion might bring her into this condition. The very objection you urge, youth, and delicate breeding, would be two great qualifications, they would disarm suspicion. Depend upon it this is not her first essay. You hear what the letter says of her energy and endurance."

"But," pleaded Claud, "we cannot be sure that the letter refers to her; she may have been simply commissioned to hand the letter to some person who was to bear it to its destination. It is not even directed you see."

"And the disguise mentioned," said the General, "and the mission to be accomplished, and the walls that report secrets, and if she was only to hand that letter to someone else what brought her here? And he speaks of her parentage as illustrious—and see here, and look there"—lifting the coroneted corner of the handkerchief, and pointing to the glittering ring on Nina's hand. "What other conclusion can we

draw than that she is the person referred to in the letter. And this state of unconsciousness; I do not say that I think it feigned, indeed I do not think so, but it seems to me to be caused by the long suppression of agitated feelings. And why suppress them, unless in fear of betraying an unsuspected presence? She may not be well fitted for her work, but I repeat it—she is a spy!”

Claud groaned inwardly. The arguments were too true to be contradicted. He shifted his ground a little.

“She may, indeed,” he resumed, “have been induced to don that disguise, carry the letter, and even enter this house on some plea quite innocent in itself. Her employers may be guilty, but I do *not* think that she is. Her condition at this moment may be, very probably is, caused by discovering too late the mission she was on.”

This was a good stroke on Claud’s part for a murmur of assent ran through the room.

“Monsieur de Meronne,” said the General angrily, “you argue as becomes an inexperienced, obstinate, ridiculous young man, who will not believe that anything wearing a petticoat, and possessing a handsome face, can do wrong.”

Claud was only too glad that his eager partisanship should be attributed to this very

small cause, and was about to commence another statement of his conviction, but was interrupted by a slight exclamation from Chevelure. That vigilant guardian had observed that from the moment the General first pronounced the word "spy," a visible change had taken place in Nina's deportment. A slight tremor stole over her; there was a nervous quivering of the lips, as if words were trying to force themselves; her eyes again opened and shut rapidly, and her fingers twitched with a convulsive movement. This lasted more or less up to the present moment; and now as all eyes, directed by Chevelure's voice, fixed themselves upon her, they could see the entire expression of her face change. The eyes were clear and intelligent, but the features convulsed, and suddenly, with a loud cry, she threw her hands above her head, bent tottering forward, and then instantly fell back.

A crushing and dangerous fall doubtless it would have been, but caught just at the right moment by Chevelure, and gently balanced, even a shock was avoided. This unexpected occurrence completely stopped the discussion for the moment. With absorbing interest all watched to see the further result of the change; and great indeed was the astonishment when, after resting with closed eyes for a few minutes, she raised herself without help, unconscious, apparently, that

anything more animate than a wall or a chair was supporting her, stood firmly on her feet, crossed her arms before her, drew up her beautiful head, and looking on the assembled faces with mingled scorn and displeasure, said in the tone of an empress questioning her slaves —

“Who dares call me a spy? I am Nina—daughter of the Duke Castellano!”

Had she said—“I am the Queen of Sheba,” they would have believed it; trick or falsity with that face was impossible.

“I doubt it not,” said the General gravely. “And may I ask, what brings the Duke’s daughter to my house at dead of night, disguised and armed, and carrying treasonable papers?”

Nina looked at him in haughty astonishment. She seemed to have forgotten time and locality; then turned her eyes round the room, growing more puzzled every moment, and at last encountered Claud’s earnest, sad glance fixed intently upon her. With a sudden rush memory came back. The Priest’s house, the long weary walk, the climbing into the dark balcony, the two men talking close beside her, a horrible tale, a moment of agony, and then a mist—she could remember no more. She guessed she had been ill, fainted, perhaps and in some way discovered. That was enough, she could imagine the rest. They believed her to be a

spy, and she had no way of clearing herself. Also she had unconsciously admitted her family name. She could not now deny it. Lying under such a terrible suspicion she knew how fatal to Claud would be any recognition or championship of her. She quickly laid her plan. She would *try* to save herself, but she *determined* to save *him*; and when the General, after waiting a few moments to give her time, repeated his question—"What brings the Duke's daughter to my house at this hour of the night?" she answered with the pride of her whole ancestry curling her red lips and flashing from her eyes —

"The Castellani give no account of their actions to mortal man, least of all to intruding strangers."

"By my life a bold damsel," said the General, reddening with anger. "I don't think we need waste our pity on her youth and inexperience. I ask you once for all, mademoiselle, what brings you here? Remember you are a prisoner, suspected of being a spy. I would advise you to be careful in your answers."

She turned upon him with sudden fury.

"False Frenchman, what brings *you* here? Here—into my father's palace, where he never bade you welcome, to plot treason and murder against all that is left noble in the land? My right is here. No usurper on earth shall drive me away. This house is

mine, whenever I choose to enter it, and if I do *not*, it is because its present possessors have tainted the very walls. I will answer you nothing. I deny your right to ask me one question. But you have called me a spy—false and cowardly! I am *not*, and you know it!”

To say that amazement held her listeners speechless would be but a mild term. If a gentle white dove, sitting on a housetop, had suddenly flown in at the window and torn them all to pieces with the strength and ferocity of a vulture, they could not have been more thoroughly unprepared for, or astonished at the attack. Brandenburg alone, whom nothing could silence, short of cutting out his tongue, found words to express his insane admiration.

“Well done, little one,” he shouted, “brava *I* say. What a beauty she looks in a passion! Look at her eyes, her cheeks, her hands—look at” —

“Silence, sir,” roared the General, “if you speak another word without orders, I’ll place you in arrest.”

Brandenburg was not in the least discomfited. He obeyed his superior with a bow, only making aside a few emphatic gestures to those close to him, intimating that the old fellow was jealous of his—Brandenburg’s—superior powers of pleasing.

Nina’s words, the suppressed passion that

shook her while she uttered them, the unmistakable dignity and truth in her face, had a signal effect. Each man in the depths of his own heart, instantly and entirely acquitted her of the vile suspicion. She might be anything, or nothing, but she was not a spy! Some of them were inclined to take the apparent meaning of her own words that she had come simply because she would not give up her right to enter that house when she choose; others thought that perhaps yearning after her old home she had been in the habit of wandering about it disguised, and on this occasion, the dreadful story of her father's fate, had enraged and maddened her. Others again believed it possible that she actually *lived* in some of the secret chambers and passages with which they knew that the building was well furnished, though they could discover but few of them. There were two or three who came nearer the mark, and only fell a little short of the true cause of her appearance there. And a solitary one, not including Claud, unerringly divined the entire outline, if not all the details of her story.

But though all believed her innocent of the General's accusation, none could say so; for that hot old man, who really had intended to be not only just but merciful, irritated by the bold bearing of his captive whom he had certainly treated with great

consideration, angered at the affronting epithets bestowed upon himself and his nation, and disgusted to see that the tide of feeling was evidently in her favour, spite of his own repeatedly affirmed belief in her guilt, launched out into a loud and rather undignified torrent of accusation and proof, recruiting his powers now and then by stealthy whispers from his Secretary, who was evidently urging him to extreme measures. Nina answered never a word. She stood with folded arms, apparently unconscious, or at any rate quite uninterested, in the threats and denunciations levelled against her; but she was not idle, for she had seen Claud, unhappy, agonised Claud, endeavouring to telegraph some communication to her across the room. By a slight sign she contrived to convey to him her wish that he should remain passive; and for a moment this contented him, for he feared that she might think that he forsook her in her peril.

But the telegraphic look was intercepted; the answering sign seen.

The Secretary, who owed his soubriquet of the "Snake" to better grounded causes than the accidental spelling of his name, began to whisper busily in the General's ear, and that irritated officer, turning suddenly round and facing Claud, detected the eyes of the latter fixed upon Nina with such a peculiar expres-

sion that interest or admiration alone could scarcely cause it.

"Monsieur de Meronne," he said abruptly, "you appear to take a great interest in the prisoner: may I ask if you are old acquaintances?"

Claud, taken at a disadvantage, changed, coloured, hesitated, and could scarcely answer. Chevelure's cool indifference, or Brandenburg's saucy daring, would have been to him at this moment an invaluable gift.

"I was just thinking," he stammered, "I fancied—at least I was trying to recognise—that is, I was beginning to remember some of the features—but the fact is," recovering himself with an effort, "these Italians are all so alike, I cannot tell one from another."

"So alike?" burst out incorrigible Brandenburg, heedless of the peremptory orders just received, "why, Claud, there's not one in the whole country in the least resembling her; she's as different" —

But the thunder of the General's voice again brought him to a stop.

"By Heaven! Captain Brandenburg, if I hear your voice again, I'll bring you to a court-martial for disobedience of orders."

Then he turned back with dark and suspicious looks to Claud.

"If, Monsieur de Meronne, you know any-

thing of the prisoner, you had better say so, for I shall certainly find it out."

Claud, angry at the imputation of anything underhand, and galled by the frequent repetition of the word "prisoner," was about to answer very hotly, very unwisely, but was happily diverted from his intention by Chevelure, who had remained all this time in the background on the other side of Nina, silent but observing everything, and now came forward with the easy grace which sat so well upon him.

"My dear General, De Meronne knows something, more or less, of every pretty girl in Naples; no wonder that he can scarcely believe himself to be unacquainted with this one who certainly ought to stand at the top of his list."

The remark was a mere joke, but so adroitly made that it gave a very simple colouring to poor Claud's embarrassment.

"It is no use to joke about it, Chevelure," said the General testily, but, without the anger he had shown to Claud, "the whole affair is so complicated that I can scarcely see my way; that that girl is here with some nefarious design I am convinced, and how far the mischief may have gone I cannot tell."

"But," continued Chevelure, lowering his voice, "I cannot agree with you, General, that she is a spy. My idea of the matter is

that she has been sent disguised to some place of shelter—we know how necessary concealment is for all that family—the letter doubtless refers to her, but I do not see that it implicates her in the least. On the road she has been alarmed, perhaps pursued, and knowing all the entrances to this house has taken shelter here, meaning most likely to steal away when she could do so without being discovered. Standing in the verandah there, she must have heard every word of your account of Castellano's fate, so her terrible cry and state of unconsciousness are fully accounted for. You have children, General; can you not imagine her state of mind at hearing such a tale of her father?"

"Stop there," said the General, "don't talk of my children. I *had* children, two brave boys; yes, both are dead! They perished through the treachery of a spy, and that spy a woman. I can show no mercy to a spy."

"I should never counsel it," returned Chevelure after a short pause of sympathy for the great grief that passed over the worn face before him. "I know that we wage against them, and necessarily, a war of extermination; but I really think that this is a mistake. You cannot judge from her demeanour; remember what she has just heard, what she must be suffering now, though she will not show it. Dispossessed, outlawed, caught in

a most equivocal position, a prisoner under the roof of her own hereditary home, and for a change from these gloomy reflections, her father's death at daybreak to-morrow. Poor thing!" he continued, lowering his voice still more. "I should think instead of that cold, proud indifference she would, if alone, lie down and weep her eyes out on the earth. True, she will give no explanation, but, then, she is mad with misery. If you are doubtful, General, how to act, why not give her in charge of some religious house: make the Superior answerable for her, till we find out something concerning her. If you consent, I will myself take her at once to the convent of St. Ursula, not half a mile from here. It is open at all hours, and the Abbess is a connection of mine. What else can you do?" for the General still hesitated. "She cannot remain where she is; in spite of her apparent recovery, I can see that she is utterly exhausted. She might fall into the same state again at any moment, and what should we do with her then? Besides"—for he still got no answer—"another fit of that kind might be fatal, and there would be enquiries, and suspicions, and complaints; and you know how implacable the King was concerning that boy who was beaten by some of our men. Pray consider, General; I think you may trust my advice."

The General moved uneasily.

"If she were not a woman," he said, in the same low tone, "I would not care. But I candidly confess that I don't know how to deal with *them*. I don't like letting her go, Chevelure, but as you say giving her in charge, to be produced again when necessary, perhaps it is the best thing to be done."

"I think you have decided wisely, General," responded Chevelure.

The General had not decided at all, but Chevelure was determined to clinch the matter. He well knew that once safe in the convent of St. Ursula she could not be dragged out again, whatever might be discovered, without the concurrence of the Abbess, and he intended to impress upon the latter, who was, indeed, his only and devoted sister, not to give Nina up to anyone until he told her to do so.

Few people could have persuaded the General so easily, but Chevelure had immense influence. The representative of one of the oldest families of the old *noblesse*, he had repeatedly refused any title whatever under the present Empire. He had joined the Buonapartists, partly from a conviction of the First Consul's power to lift France from the chaos of the Revolution, partly because there was no other field open to his energies; but certainly not from enmity to the Bourbons, or dislike to an hereditary monarchy or

aristocracy. He served the Emperor, but simply as a soldier, and no man served him better. His own regiment was a model, his men adored him. *Why*, no one exactly knew, for he was a strict disciplinarian, never overlooked bad conduct, and allowed no licence.

Indeed, so well known was this, that a party of men of Chevelure's regiment were always hailed by the oppressed peasantry as a protection from their marauding comrades. In the field he was brave as a lion, and with a genius for generalship almost equal to a Wellington. Rich, handsome, and highly bred, he wanted nothing for himself; all that he had, strength, talents and money, he bestowed freely on others. Wherever difficult work was to be done, Chevelure was sent—and did it. If a perplexing crisis occurred, or a delicate investigation had to be made, his counsel was required, his services were indispensable; and he so seldom gave advice without being asked, that when he did, it was invariably followed without question or comment.

This credit and influence, which he rarely used, and never valued, now suddenly became of the greatest importance. He had taken no part in the discussion before, merely volunteering to stand beside Nina, and see that she came to no harm, as a simple act of compassion, and could not be supposed to be in-

fluenced by any other motive than justice and expediency. Now, therefore, that he gave his vote on her side, and backed it by powerful arguments, the General, who was completely puzzled and bewildered, besides being tired and hungry, and weary of the whole affair, began to see that the safest and most dignified compromise he could make, would be to accept Chevelure's suggestion, and place Nina in the Ursuline Convent, to be produced, if necessary, at some future time.

He was just about to make this decision known, when a hasty knocking at the door prevented him, and the sentry put in his head saying —

“Despatches, General.”

“Send them in at once,” said the General rising, and turning to the door.

The sentry disappeared, and another figure stood in the doorway.

A dragoon; hot, dusty, torn and battered, stained with blood, and black with smoke.

“Great Heaven!” exclaimed the General, aghast. “Where do you come from?”

“From where you were this afternoon, General; I have ridden like fury to bring you this,” laying a sealed packet on the table.

“But,” said the General, taking it up, but still looking at the man, “what is the cause of the state you are in? Surely, there was no resistance?”

"No resistance?" echoed the man sulkily, "those scoundrelly Italians have beaten us for once, as Frenchmen never were beaten before."

"But the man—the rebel—Castellano!" gasped the General.

"Read, sir, read; you'll find it all there; and I can answer any questions you like afterwards."

With trembling hands the General broke the seal, and read a short despatch, exclamations of rage and grief escaping him as he did so.

"Gone!" he exclaimed, dashing the paper on the table. "Escaped! And Villeneuve dead, and two of his best officers, and thirty men killed and wounded! How did it happen? Speak man; this afternoon everything was going well. What was the cause?"

"We know no more, General, than you do, and I can tell you little more than Captain de Burgh has written. The truth is, that when we thought their plans so well known to us, ours were better known to them. There is treachery somewhere. Spies have been at work. When we got into the enclosure, we were received with one of the best volleys I ever heard; disciplined troops evidently, no raw recruits or blundering peasantry. I could swear there were English among them—many of us thought so, then

when we tried to retreat, a party in ambush outside, rose up and cut us down. How many there were I cannot tell, but I fancy not a great number, or they would not have left us so soon. But they have carried off their Chief in triumph, and their killed and wounded too, if they have any, for we could find none. Nor could we discover what direction they went in; they seemed to melt away. Their spies have been at work to some purpose."

"Spies!" exclaimed the General. "Yes, I have it; I see it all now, clear as the noon-day; there stands the spy who has done all this mischief!" pointing to Nina, with hands that trembled with passion. "Taken not an hour ago in this very house, in this very room; concealed in yonder gallery, disguised, armed, carrying a letter brimful of treason; and she owns herself that rebel's daughter. Now, gentlemen," turning to the bystanders, "what do you say? Am I right? Is she a spy? So surely as the Emperor sits upon his throne she is a spy, and shall die a spy's death!"

"But," interrupted Claud, white with rage and terror, "though a spy may have been at work, that is no proof that she is one."

"No proof, sir? . . . The rebel's daughter enters my house at night, and lies concealed there for hours, wearing a double

disguise, carrying a letter full of insolent triumph and boasting treason, and a stiletto ready sharpened for use. And we find that by some mysterious agency our secrets are discovered, our plans frustrated, our enemies escape, our friends are killed, our troops disgracefully beaten. How has all this come about? Through the agency of a spy! And how did the spy gain information? I will tell you; here, in this house, in this very chamber, where I have sat in council with others night after night, and under cover of that disguise." And he flung his hand angrily towards the monk's gown which lay upon the floor.

When the General proclaimed aloud Castellano's escape, Chevelure still silently watching Nina, saw her clasp her hands together and softly kiss a little silver image of the Virgin which hung round her neck, while a flash of joy so radiant and yet so tender lit up her face, that he almost detected himself thanking Heaven fervently for the rebel's success. He saw every moment more clearly that she had been utterly ignorant of her father's danger, and also of the means taken to free him from it. But what would his single conviction, without a proof to support it, weigh against the appearances that surrounded her. From the moment that she was pointed out, the dragoon had stared with infinite

astonishment at the female figure, at the other end of the room, and now hearing this account of her appearance he simply ejaculated —

“ Ah ! a woman, they are always the most dangerous ! ”

Dreadful consternation fell upon the whole assembly as such overwhelming evidence came down upon the unfortunate Nina. Many of them, though grieved and shocked, gave in to these convincing proofs. A few only, among whom were Claud, Chevelure, and Brandenburg, still tried to give reasons for her innocence, but in vain, for the tide had turned against her. The irritation caused by the victorious escape of Castellano, and grief and anger at the untimely death of the three officers, went far to extinguish both pity and justice in the hearts of most of them.

“ The disguise alone,” said the General, “ is sufficient evidence ; that of itself condemns her.”

“ You must remember, General,” said Claud, “ that the whole Castellano family is outlawed ; that peasant’s dress was probably necessary to her very existence.”

“ And the monk’s frock,” retorted the General. “ What was that assumed for ? ”

No one answered this question, till Brandenburg, who, if he could not speak to the point, *must* speak away from it, softly suggested that “ perhaps she was cold.”

Even in the midst of the agitated feelings there, a smile came upon some faces, for the hot air of summer was pouring like the heat of a furnace through the open window.

"And that letter," continued the General. "If I could only guess the writer. La Serpe, can you not recollect anyone who bears the device, a crozier and a coronet?"

"I beg pardon, General," said the dragoon advancing. "What device did you say?"

"A crozier and a coronet," replied the General. "There," handing him the letter, "look at it."

"This," said the man; "why this is the seal of that villanous Jesuit priest, who has given us more trouble than the Duke himself. Father Francesco they call him."

"Francesco is the name signed here," said the Secretary gleefully, for he began to scent blood.

"You hear; am I right?" said the General, appealing to the faces round.

The dreadful truth, growing every moment plainer, who could contradict?

It wanted but one evidence more. As the dragoon replaced the letter on the table, he caught sight of the dagger.

"Was this the weapon found on the prisoner?" he said. "May I examine it, General? I served my time to an armourer in Flanders, and know most of the trade

tricks. This is curious," he muttered, suddenly interested, and peering at it on all sides. "Was this positively found *on her*?"

"It was in her hand when she was discovered," said the General.

The soldier raised his eyes, and turned them on Nina with a strange expression. Then he examined the dagger again.

"It is very old," he said, "Venetian work."

"Is there anything uncommon about it," said the General. "Speak out, my man, you must tell us all you know."

There was something in the man's manner that made Claud's white face whiter still, and Chevelure bit his under-lip till the blood came.

"I am sorry to say anything to the prejudice of mademoiselle," said the dragoon, and he glanced at her again with a look of compassion, seeming to notice for the first time how young, and fair, and helpless she was, "but"—hesitating—

"Speak out," said the General. "I command you."

"That dagger is poisoned," he answered curtly, laying it down upon the table.

Poisoned!

A dead silence fell on the room. Even the General was too shocked to speak.

Chevelure, who had never ceased his watchful care of Nina, saw her eyes dilate

with a horrified expression, and knew that she was innocent of the dreadful knowledge, and knew also that no one would believe her so.

"It is not true," shouted Claud. "I will not believe it."

"It is true, sir," said the dragoon, "I can prove it to you."

"Do so, my man," said the Secretary briskly. "We may discover how it was intended to act. I have some knowledge myself of poisons" —

"I'll stake my life you have," muttered Brandenburg.

The Secretary glared at him.

"Did you speak Captain Brandenburg?"

"Not to you," said Brandenburg, with withering contempt.

"If any gentleman will lend me a glove," said the dragoon, "I will show how the poison is intended to act."

Someone held out a thick riding-glove. He doubled it up almost into a ball.

"You see," he said to those who gathered round, "there is a spring here, near the hilt; the shock of striking knocks up that spring and opens the chamber containing the poison, which instantly darts down a tube to the point—for the dagger is hollow, you can feel how light it is—and enters the wound. A man may say his paternoster then, for he's done for. See now," and

laying the glove on the table he struck it forcibly, then removed the dagger, and showed the hole in the glove damp with a greenish liquid; while a faint and sickening odour, something like jessamine, rose from it.

Again a silence.

"And is this poison fatal?" asked the General in a low tone.

"I can say yes to that," answered La Serpe. "I know the scent of it well."

"I fear so," said the dragoon quietly.

"And," continued the General, "it was intended to be coursing through all our veins by this time. My duty is plain. We all know the Articles of War concerning spies. The sentence on a spy taken in the act is instant death. Those who agree with me hold up their hands."

With the exception of Nina's three champions and two others, every hand in the room was raised. There was no hesitation now. Considerations of personal safety silenced the last promptings of compassion.

Then the General turned and faced his prisoner.

"Wretched woman," he said, "have you anything to urge, any excuse or palliation, for the crime that you have already committed, or the still deeper one that you were meditating? I will listen, though I need not."

Nina by this time fully comprehended her position. She understood the whole force of the frightful evidence against her.

Though apparently unheeding, her mind had taken in, one after another, all the unfortunate circumstances which, linked together, formed such a terrible chain; and the crowning atrocity of the poison bound it round her with fatal certainty. She scarcely wondered at being believed guilty, but the sudden and cruel sentence shocked her sense of justice, and showed her that revenge was the feeling uppermost in the minds of her judges; and also the vanity of any endeavour to set at naught the massive power which encompassed her. In her swift condemnation she saw shadowed out the fierce despotic tyranny of the hateful Corsican, which had rendered France the dread and loathing of every European nation, and the contempt and aversion of every just and upright mind. In the joy of hearing of her father's escape she had almost felt herself free; and now this blow fell upon her with sudden and stunning weight. But even in such a terrible emergency her stubborn pride never forsook her. Certainly her face blanched, the moisture stood on her forehead, but with a strong will she conquered every sign of weakness. She met the General's look with one as stern, and much more composed.

"I have nothing to say," she answered calmly. "What should I say? I am innocent, that is my real crime. I know well that in the eyes of Frenchmen, from the Corsican robber himself down to the meanest slave that he hires to commit murders for him, to be innocent and helpless is guilt indeed! I told you before that I was no spy; the Castellani are not accustomed to repeat their words."

"Stubborn vixen," exclaimed the enraged General, "listen to your sentence. You shall go from here to the dungeons underneath this castle. There you may pass the hours in meditation till daylight. You shall have a priest; I would not willingly send a creature into eternity burthened with such crime. And at daybreak to-morrow morning you shall be taken into the court-yard and there shot to death. And may Heaven have mercy on your soul!"

There was a murmur—almost a groan, from the listeners as he concluded, for even those who believed her most guilty were not prepared for such rapid measures. Yet they could not retract their consent, and none who had given it were bold enough openly to demur at this imperious exercise of martial law.

But Claud burst from the group about him and strode to the centre of the room.

"General," he said, stamping passionately.

on the floor, "I protest against this—I will not countenance it. I demand full enquiry, an open trial, before such a sentence is carried into execution. You have no power to do it."

"*You demand, sir?*" exclaimed the General, "and who are you? Take care, sir, you may be the next accused yourself. I have power, if I chose, to have that woman shot where she stands, without question or reference to anyone. There is no law for a spy. Learn your duty, sir. Sit down this instant."

"It shall not be, I say," shouted Claud, foaming with rage. "It is murder—villany—I will knock any man down who lays a hand upon her—I will appeal to the King—to the Emperor"—

"Sit down, sir, do you hear," roared the infuriated Chief, "one word more and I place you in arrest. Lucky for you, Captain De Meronne, that I know you to be a young fool ready to do battle for everything with a smooth cheek, but don't try me too far, sir—what do you say, La Serpe?"

For the Secretary was again whispering in his ear, and as the General listened, his countenance changed so much, that Claud, fancying his adviser was proposing less hasty measures, withdrew quietly to his seat.

Nina, whose haughty calm even the terror of death could not move, was shaken to her

very soul by the generous devotion of the man whom she valued above life itself. Her lips quivered, the tears which she could no longer control welled into her eyes, and fell trickling down her cheeks. She put her hand into her pocket, but withdrew it empty; the handkerchief which should have been there lay still upon the table. She glanced at it wistfully, but could not venture to move; but vigilant Chevelure saw that, as well as every other movement that she made, and without a moment's hesitation stepped to the table and took up the handkerchief. By a word the General's evil genius drew his attention to this.

"Chevelure, I beg you not to move that handkerchief," he said, with a suspicious glance.

Chevelure looked at him with a slight expression of astonishment, as if wondering what he could possibly mean, stepped back to his place, and handed the handkerchief to Nina; and was rewarded with the sweetest look of gratitude that ever came out of human eyes. She suddenly comprehended that this silent giant who had stood beside her all the evening was a champion as determined, if not as vehement, as Claud.

As she took the handkerchief she shivered a little.

"Are you cold, mademoiselle, or ill?" he said anxiously.

The Secretary whispered again, and the General became furious.

"Colonel Chevelure, I request that you will move to the other end of the room; I neither understand nor allow this communication with a condemned prisoner."

But Chevelure, quite unheeding, lifted the monk's frock from the floor, and wrapped it round Nina's shoulders, and as he did so contrived to whisper in her ear —

"Fear nothing—we are friends."

Then as the General turned upon him with a torrent of injurious words, he strolled quietly to the other end of the room, merely remarking with a slight bow —

"Pardon me, General, but I cannot be uncourteous to a lady, were she fifty times a spy."

There had been no lack of conversation meantime between the other members of that hastily formed jury. The military laws concerning spies were too well known to admit of dispute, yet even the most rigid disciplinarians were for some sort of exception in the present case. The whole affair had been so hurried and unexpected that they scarcely knew to what they had pledged themselves, when they voted death to be the righteous punishment of a spy.

Nor could they, nor indeed would they, go back from their word, for the remembrance of that dagger while terrifying had

hardened them. Yet they were confused, and felt vaguely that their verdict needed some sort of justification, and therefore talked rapidly among themselves, never coming to any conclusion satisfactory to their own minds.

But now the General turned from his whispered conversation with the Secretary, and spoke to the dragoon who still stood waiting orders, and by no means uninterested in what was going on.

"You can go now and rest," he said, "it is useless to return to-night. Come to me early to-morrow morning; I will give you orders for Captain De Burgh, and stop—hark—tell the sentry to send the Captain of the Guard to me; also a sergeant and a file of men."

The dragoon saluted and went out. There was a stir and murmur all round when this order was given.

Chevelure walked gravely up to the General.

"Are you determined in this matter?" he said with a slight hauteur. "The time is very short, only a few hours. I think it would be well to reflect; remorse is not a pleasant feeling, and mistakes sometimes occur."

"I am perfectly prepared," replied the General stiffly, "to take the consequences of what I do."

"Perhaps," said La Serpe with insolent malignity, "Colonel Chevelure thinks it not fair that mademoiselle alone should suffer for all these disastrous circumstances. I dare say he feels that in justice a share of the punishment should fall on others. No doubt he knows best, he is evidently a great admirer of mademoiselle."

Chevelure looked down on the speaker as from an immeasurable height, but condescended no further notice.

"And," continued the wily reptile, "Captain De Meronne and Captain Brandenburg appear to be of the same opinion. It seems to me quite unaccountable that officers of the King's army should be so very anxious for the escape of a convicted spy. Perhaps, General, mademoiselle might be induced by stringent measures to inform us if she has any accomplices. It is useless, Captain Brandenburg, to shake your fist at me"—for he had turned suddenly, and caught Brandenburg going through a furious pantomime of that nature—"you may be sure we shall find means to make mademoiselle tell all she knows."

"*You* would, doubtless," burst out Brandenburg, with indignant scorn; "*you* would put her on the rack, I suppose. A man who would sign his King's death-warrant, and insult him on the scaffold afterwards, would be capable of torturing a woman!"

The Secretary stopped, turned pale, and shrank into himself at this unexpected revelation, for he had believed that vile episode in his life to be buried in oblivion. He lifted his head in a moment, however, to say, with a look of cool and insolent surprise —

“Doubtless such a one would, if such were to be found, and the institution of torture still in vogue.”

It was evident that he was determined to implicate Claud, Chevelure, and Brandenburg in Nina's supposed guilt, and, if possible, destroy them with her. Chevelure saw this, and took his measures accordingly. The case was too strong to cope with by ordinary means ; if they would save the unfortunate girl, they must first save themselves. Of all present those three only had had the courage to stand up and openly take her part. They were already regarded with suspicion. The Secretary's hints had not been without effect, and though none of their brother officers in the least believed them guilty of complicity with a spy, yet they did believe their ideas of duty and discipline to be lax indeed, and their determinate defence of convicted crime unaccountable and curious. And though all admitted that the girl was very handsome, and might be supposed by that to influence them to a certain point, yet after all there were plenty of pretty girls in Naples besides, and with far pleasanter manners.

Chevelure read all this in the faces that surrounded him. The General, not an unmerciful man by nature, was obstinate to a degree; and constantly plied with suggestions from his Secretary as to the defiance and insubordination of the trio, would have braved any consequences rather than give in. Chevelure, therefore, after taking a rapid survey of all the points of the question, made up his mind, and merely saying, "Very well, General, you are the responsible person; remember that I wash my hands of the consequences of this night's work," retreated to his former position near Claud and Brandenburg, who seemed by a sympathetic feeling to have drawn together.

There was no time for even a word now, for the measured tramp of the soldiers was heard at the end of the gallery, and the next moment they stood in the room.

The officer, who looked very young and rather nervous, stared with wide-open eyes at the strange scene; and ten times more when the General pointed out Nina, related the circumstances of her capture—the disguise, the letter, the dagger, likewise the escape of the rebel, the death of the three officers, her conviction as a spy, and consequent condemnation.

"At sunrise to-morrow morning," he concluded, "let the sentence be put into execution—here—in the courtyard. Take

charge of your prisoner. Let her be secured in the strong room in the left wing. Place a sentry on the door and another on the outside wall. Remember, you are responsible for her."

"The sentence to be really executed to-morrow?" said the officer hesitating, and looking somewhat scared. "With no more enquiry, no more" —

"Nothing, sir," returned the General, frowning; "that is all done. Take charge of your prisoner."

The timid subordinate silently obeyed.

Claud all this time had remained quietly seated, forcing himself to appear calm and composed, determined to see if this horrible tragedy was really to be carried into effect. But when, at a word from the officer, two soldiers advanced and placed themselves one on each side of Nina, he started to his feet with an astounding anathema, which, fortunately, his agitation choked in the utterance; but at the same moment was seized and held prisoner by Chevelure's powerful arms, and a stern whisper came into his ear —

"Do you wish to destroy her? Speak or move and you do it. Remain silent, and I swear she shall be safe."

For a moment he struggled helplessly with the iron muscles that held him, and then, partly that he saw the necessity of this advice, partly that his attention was diverted

to Nina herself, allowed himself to be drawn back to his seat.

Though Nina had thoroughly understood her position, she had not positively realised it till this moment. There had been so much excitement, and so many conflicting feelings, that she had not had time to take in the terrible fact of death.

But now that she heard herself completely given over to her fate, carried off from the few that befriended her, abandoned to cruel men, foreigners and strangers, the night already half gone, the dreadful hour so close, the whole horror came upon her at once.

With the instinct of self-preservation she started back, gasping for breath, as the soldiers approached her, and cast an agonised, appealing look round the room, and so doing encountered Chevelure's large brown eyes fixed upon her.

The look was so full of meaning, the expression so calm, and strong, and self-reliant, that she almost felt as if help was at hand.

She remembered his whispered words, and they gave her just courage enough to endure a little longer with dignity.

"Stand back!" she said, as the soldiers attempted to lay hold of her. "I will go with you of my own free will; a Castellano goes no other way."

Then she walked forward and stood face to face with the General.

"Wicked and perverse old man," she said with a sort of contemptuous pity, "what has tempted you to thirst for my blood? To take away the life that God gave, and you can never restore again? I go to the death you have condemned me to, and I leave you to the remorse which shall never cease to gnaw your heart till it lies cold as my own."

She threw up her hands with a passionate gesture.

"I speak before High Heaven which hears me! Tremble all of you who have taken part in this night's evil work. I leave you to a terrible reckoning—to a swift and sure avenger. I leave you to Duke Castellano, who comes to require his daughter at your hands." She turned to the soldiers. "I am ready—lead on."

She moved forward, and all those who were seated involuntarily stood up as she passed. She walked steadily, gazing straight before her, till she reached the door. Then she turned and looked at Claud.

Full of gratitude and love, full of anguish and despair, that look will haunt him till he dies!

As those unearthly eyes passed out of sight a mist seemed to gather upon his own. By a strong effort he remained standing, but

lost consciousness of all that was passing around him.

When he next became cognisant of present facts he was leaning over the balcony, supported by Chevelure, while Brandenburg stood a sort of sentry just inside. The General was gone with the Secretary and his own especial adherents. The rest were gathered round the table, vociferating and gesticulating like the veriest Babel.

"I pulled you in here," said Chevelure, answering his look of enquiry, "for I saw that you had lost your head; are you all right now?"

"Yes—yes: but don't talk of me. Chevelure, what is to be done?"

"Everything," returned Chevelure gravely, "and but little time to do it in. It is too late for appeal to the King or anything of that kind. We must take the law into our own hands. Brandenburg, what did the General say as he went out? I could not hear."

"Say?" echoed Brandenburg, "why that he hoped to see us all at supper in half-an-hour's time. Supper indeed!" with a look of infinite disgust, "as if any man who is a man and not a brute could have an appetite after such a night's work as this!"

"Most of them will go, though," said Chevelure, "fortunately for us. Come, Claud, we must walk unconcernedly out of

the room. Then to work as quickly as you will, and God defend the right!"

Both his auditors looked up in blank astonishment at this most unexpected exclamation.

"I am not an Atheist," he said with a slight smile, "though I believe you think me so. But we lose time. Let us go. Brandenburg, follow us in a few minutes. Come to my rooms. Now, while they are all quarrelling."

And drawing Claud's arm within his own they quietly left the room together.

CHAPTER VI.

ALONG straight galleries, down wide flights of stone stairs, through spacious chambers and narrow vaulted passages, past prison-like doors, arched and iron-clamped; over rough stone pavements and paths of soft clay, went Nina and her conductors, at the same pace, with the same measured tramp, silent and expressionless, as moving images might be.

The officer had so arranged his men that one half went before and the other followed the prisoner, while he himself walked beside her, thus securely guarded yet free from all contact with the soldiers.

Now and again his eyes turned stealthily upon his strange companion, and with every glance his face grew more puzzled and more pitiful. This young girl, who, let alone her great beauty, wore an expression so frank and noble that to associate it in any way with treachery seemed almost sacrilege, to have been condemned so unhesitatingly by so many voices even on the evidence that had been made known to himself, seemed marvellous.

It was a mysterious business he thought. The accusation *could* not be true. The General and his officers must be infatuated.

Yet what could *he* do? He must obey orders. And his orders were to see that young girl, beautiful as she was, and innocent as he believed her to be, shot at day-break like a vile deserter.

"It was a shameful duty to put upon him; he had not entered the service to massacre women and children, and she was little more than a child; surely it was an unjust, cruel sentence!"

Turning these unsatisfactory reflections in his mind, he was recalled to himself by the sound of voices, loud and boisterous, at a little distance.

He looked round, saw where he was, and ordered the men to halt. Then calling the sergeant, he gave him some directions in a low tone. The latter set off running down a narrow passage, from the end of which the sounds proceeded; the rest waited.

Nina's weary feet had by this time almost given over supporting her exhausted body. She was completely worn out.

Predominant in her mind was a wish to fling herself down anywhere, and never move again. Yet she would do nothing that seemed like an appeal to the pity of her enemies. Standing near the wall she contrived to lean against it, hoping the position would not be observed.

"Mademoiselle!"

She started up at once, expecting some

rough refusal of this slight accommodation. But a very gentle voice greeted her, and very compassionate words.

"Mademoiselle, I fear you are over-weary; can I assist you in any way; can I do anything for you; would you like to rest a little? I will have a bench fetched instantly."

She looked up with as much power of wonder as her exhaustion permitted into the speaker's face.

"Are we near?" she said, in so low a voice that he had to ask her to repeat her words.

"Are we near—near to—to where I am to go?"

"Close, mademoiselle, at the door; I only wait the key. Ah! here it comes," and the sergeant was seen running towards them, a huge bunch of keys in his hand.

"But a few steps farther," he continued, "and we are there. Can you walk that far, mademoiselle?"

"I think I can," she answered faintly.

The sergeant moved on in front, stopped at the next door, unlocked and opened it, and the whole party entered.

A large stone room with bare walls. Plenty of high windows far above the reach of the tallest man, and, though open, so securely barred that escape by them would have been an absurd thought. In one corner

a rude image of the Virgin, with a lamp before it, but neither trimmed nor lighted; a stool, a wooden table, and a couple of planks resting on tressles.

Nina sank down upon the stool, laid her arms upon the table, and buried her face in them. For a few moments every feeling was merged in one of intense weariness. Almost as if in a dream she heard the word of command given, the soldiers' measured tread as they filed through the doorway, and then complete silence.

After a little, the first craving for rest satisfied, she looked up. She was not alone as she had expected. The officer still stood there.

"I waited, mademoiselle, to see if there was anything I could do—any assistance I could render."

She looked at him blankly.

"Is it true that I am to be shot at day-break?"

"Alas!" he replied, "such are my orders; would it were otherwise. I understand but little of the cause of all this, but I feel assured that there must be some horrible mistake."

"A horrible mistake? Yes," she answered dreamily, without moving her eyes.

"Then it is a mistake?" he exclaimed.

"I was sure of it; I knew it."

"Knew what?" she asked vaguely.

"I knew that mademoiselle could not be a spy."

"I a spy?" she answered, suddenly reviving into proud life. "I tell you, monsieur, that there are some in that room above who know me to be as innocent of all evil intention in this matter as they themselves are. But I cannot clear myself; let it be"—and her head sank down again upon the table.

The compassionate Frenchman was deeply moved. Perhaps some idea of the truth occurred to him.

"Surely something can be done," he exclaimed; "something must, shall be done. Have you not friends, mademoiselle? I will undertake to communicate with them at any cost. I am powerless myself, but I will help gladly in any way that you can suggest. This duty is obnoxious to me; I feel that the execution of this sentence will be a crime."

Nina hesitated. A thousand wild ideas chased each other through her mind; but all barren and impossible.

"I have no friends," she answered at last with a breaking voice, "they are all outlaws—hiding or dead!"

For one moment she had thought that the wealthy goldsmith and his son, who stood so high among the French authorities, might have power to help her; but the next showed her how hopeless such an effort would be. She did not even know the number of the

goldsmith's house ; she remembered that it was in the Piazza d'Oro, but that, as its name implied, was the residence of all the goldsmiths in Naples. It was far away ; it was dead of night ; the goldsmith and all his household would be sleeping soundly ; before he could be found, and roused, and made to comprehend what was required of him it would be daylight, and she would have passed for ever from among the living. No, the time was too short ; it was useless to attempt it. A clinging conviction that Claud and his friends would not let her die without a struggle, determined her to try nothing herself. If any possible means could save her, they would find them.

Suddenly she looked up.

"Is it a painful death?" she asked anxiously and shuddering.

The poor young officer could scarcely answer her ; he tried to evade the question.

"Tell me, I entreat you," she implored. "I do not think you cruel as some are. You will make it as easy as you can."

"Mademoiselle, if by flatly refusing to obey orders I could save your life I would do it, though at the expense of my commission and reputation. But I know, unhappily, that one less scrupulous would be found to supply my place. I can only promise that if it should come to so terrible a pass, though I fervently hope it may yet be averted, all

that care and compassion can suggest shall be done."

"I thank you," she said softly. "There is one thing more. I was promised a priest; you will not forget—the time is so short."

"A priest? Of course," he rejoined quickly; "I will give instant orders, and I will send in some refreshment. Do not refuse to touch it," seeing denial in her eyes; "it will give you strength at any rate, and also" —

He paused, passed his hand thoughtfully over his forehead, took a few turns up and down the room, finally came back and spoke to her with impressive earnestness.

"While the priest remains here I shall walk up and down outside with the sentry. When he leaves, I will myself accompany him to the gates, and see him safely out without hindrance or molestation. The passages are dark; conversation will be impossible, for I speak no Italian. You comprehend? That is good. You will remember. Adieu, mademoiselle."

And in a moment he was gone, leaving her all startled and speechless at his unmistakable words. But she had fully taken in their meaning. If she could contrive to escape in the dress of the priest no inconvenient watchfulness on his part should hinder the design. In spite of her weariness and misery a little spring of hope

danced up in her heart. And refreshed for the moment, she fell into a deep fit of musing.

During the last few hours she had gone through strange experiences. She had learned that her own cherished people, her own beloved Italians, to avenge whose wrongs her whole family had been brought to poverty, misery, and lives of daily peril and terror, had sold their chivalrous defender to death, and themselves to willing slavery, and their whole race and name to eternal shame and derision, for a few paltry pieces of gold; and on the other hand, among the loathed and hated enemies, for whom no condemnation was too great, no punishment too abiding, had suddenly appeared more than one—two—three—and four, standing up at the risk almost of reputation and life, to take part with an unknown foreigner and stranger, urged by no motive but justice and compassion to her, honour and conscience in themselves.

“How was this?” she asked herself. “Had her life been a delusion? In resisting the encroaches of these Frenchmen, was the world only kicking vainly against the irresistible power of a higher order of beings, which must, by the law of Nature, subjugate the lower?”

And then she remembered the sentence she herself lay under, how unjust, cruel, and revengeful; the weak and obstinate old man

whom none dared oppose; the unconcealed vileness of the Secretary; the vacillation and cowardice of the whole assembly; only excepted those three noble and generous souls who acknowledged the divine law of truth and mercy above every ordinance of man's contriving. And then, again, though some among her countrymen could be so vile, yet others that she knew of how chivalrous—how illustrious! Her father's courageous devotion; the Priest's life of self-denial and danger; Giacomo Capri's unhesitating renunciation of all his hardly won and dearly-prized honours, because the man who bestowed them oppressed his fellow-creatures; all came to prove that neither excellence nor infamy belonged entirely to one nation, and if she must not worship the invaders as demigods, neither could she fear them as fiends, nor despise them as barbarians, still less detest them as she had been taught to do, as an infamous and degraded nation.

She sat up with clasped hands and knitted brows trying to make all this plain to her bewildered mind. But her mind wandered hopelessly away, from a trial too great for its strength. Then she made an effort to set in order the events of the last twenty-four hours.

It seemed an immeasurable time, long turbulent years, since she and Margherita last lay down to rest in the little cottage at

the end of the Chiaia. A life had elapsed since then. All that should have happened up to old age had been pressed into those few hours. And but a few more, and would the last dark page turn, and the book of her existence close for ever? She said to herself "Yes," but she did not believe it. Though apparently solid and substantial, when she tried to grapple with the phantom it became only a black shadow.

The turning of the key and jangling of bolts and chains at her prison door roused her. The sergeant and some men entered. They brought a sort of mattress, an open sack stuffed with a kind of wiry hay, called "Sicilian grass," green and fragrant. This was placed on the boards. A smaller bag of the same material served as a pillow. Then they arranged upon the table wine, water, meat, bread, and fruit, trimmed and lighted the lamp before the image, set a larger one beside the provisions, and withdrew without a word.

Nina turned her aching eyes towards the impromptu bed, rough and homely, but how deliciously inviting it looked. Had any fate less dreadful been hanging over her, or even that farther off, she could have flung herself down and slept like a child. But she only looked at it, sighed, and turned her head away again.

"Would the priest come? And if he came,

what should she say to him? Would Claud and his kind friends rescue her at the last? Would the officer of the guard keep his word, and silently favour any attempt that might be made for her? And if help *did* come, would she have strength to use the swiftness and dexterity necessary for any mode of escape?"

With a sudden thought she turned to the table, which she had scarcely noticed, took a portion of meat and bread, ate it eagerly, drank wine mixed with water, for her throat and lips were dry, her head light and hot; went hastily to the corner where the image stood, knelt down, and said a few earnest words.

"Help me, Madonna, and I will transgress no more; I will confess and make atonement."

She thought at that moment that to be free both in body and conscience, even at the risk of having to renounce Claud, would be a rest and happiness almost making up for the sacrifice.

But the feeling was not genuine; for in her heart was a secret conviction that even Father Francesco would look leniently on the generous Frenchman, who had tried to befriend her almost at the risk of his own life.

Strengthened by the food, and comforted by her short prayer, she determined to facili-

tate still further her possible chance of escape. She would lie down and rest her aching limbs for a little, but of course not sleep. She would await the priest who had been promised.

She threw herself upon the bed! Oh, delicious feeling of rest! In spite of her determination, in spite of the anxious terror of her mind, in two minutes she was in a death-like sleep.

How long she slept she knew not. She was wakened by the heavy door turning on its hinges, and clattering all its bolts and chains with ostentatious ferocity. She started to her feet thinking her last moment was come. The door opened slowly; there was some whispering outside; Nina placed her hands before her eyes that she might not see her executioners. No one spoke to her. The next moment she heard the door closed again, locked, and barred. Instantaneously she removed her hands. A single figure stood before her—not a priest, but a Capuchin friar; a stout old man with grey hair and a white beard.

Either his penitent was different to what he expected, or he was at a loss how to address her, for he stood irresolute in the middle of the room, neither speaking nor moving.

Seeing this Nina came forward.

“Father,” she commenced, but stopped

short, struck by the strange expression of the friar's eyes.

"Nina," whispered a well-known voice.

But for the schooling she had gone through she would have screamed with surprise as she saw the grey hair and white beard removed, and Claud's face come out above the Capuchin's coarse brown frock.

"Ah! you have come to save me," she gasped, and fell into a fit of smothered hysterical sobbing.

"Hush, hush. Ah! poor Nina," looking with remorseful pity at her worn white face and trembling hands.

"You will save me," she repeated, trying anxiously to calm herself as, with the hope of escape, love of life, and liberty, and happiness came back in all its strength. "I was sure you would not leave me to die. I have suffered so much; I cannot say how much. Never mind; I am strong again now. Tell me"—looking earnestly into his face—"why did you disappear for so long? Have you been ill? Ah, yes, I see it; you are ill now; you are white, you tremble. Listen; you shall do yourself no harm for me; you shall run no risk. Say, then, is it illness? or is it"—

She paused in her rapid inquiries, for no answer came to any of them. She pressed her hands tightly together.

"Perhaps you are come to tell me that there is no hope?"

"No, no," he answered quickly, "not that. Dear Nina, I have come to save you. But we must not stop now for question and answer. I have not even time to ask what fatal madness brought you to this house. The space is short, the work difficult and dangerous. If it fails, we are all lost; not you and I only—others too. We must begin at once. Nina, are you strong? Are you courageous?"

"Try me," she said confidently. "You will see what I can do. Am I to slip out unseen? I think I might. They will not look too closely, I feel sure."

Claud shook his head.

"Impossible," he said. "That door is not to be opened again under any pretext till daybreak. Once admitted, my permission, or rather order, is, to remain here till morning. Then we leave together, under an escort. Half-an-hour since, double sentries were placed all along the galleries, and on the outside walls. All who pass in or out of the gates are closely examined. I should never have reached this myself, without discovery, but for the Captain of the Guard, who, I cannot help thinking, suspected my disguise, and took upon himself the responsibility of passing me in without search. I

know to whose insolent interference I am indebted for this exasperating hindrance," he added, setting his teeth and clenching his hands with repressed fury, "and I have sworn, if I live, to repay him with double interest. But," he muttered, checking himself, "of that hereafter. No, escape by the door is not to be thought of."

"Through the windows?" asked Nina, glancing at the solid bars, and distrustfully surveying their height from the ground.

"Nor through the windows," he replied. "No, there is a better way; more secure if we can achieve it, but uncertain and perilous in the extreme."

He glanced at the door, and went on in a low voice, but with passionate rapidity —

"The villain who has planned and determined the destruction of us all, little thought, when his cunning suggestions were acted upon, that they would prove our principal assistance. An order has been given, on no pretext whatever to open your prison door after the entrance of the priest. However we might call or cry, whatever disturbance we might choose to make in here, it would not be attended to. All is to be considered a trick, a trap, a means of evasion. Therefore, we are safe; we may do what we like; no inconvenient prying will stop us."

"Then it is through the window?" said

Nina, thinking she must have misunderstood him, and again glancing doubtfully at the thick iron bars.

"No, no, not the window. Simple Nina, there are double sentries outside as well as inside, two to each window, and all within call of each other. No, the window would be an impossibility."

"But how then?" she ejaculated despairingly, for the chances of escape seemed to grow more slender every moment.

"I will tell you," he said, "but first I must disencumber myself of all this."

And in a moment, from under the voluminous folds of the brown gown, came rolls of clothing, iron instruments, coils of rope, a lantern, matches, bottles of various sizes, and numberless other articles. So ingeniously had these things been arranged, that no one, without examination, would have believed that the stout appearance and clumsy walk of the friar proceeded from anything but age and awkwardness.

Nina looked on in astonishment, and could not help smiling at the slender appearance of the holy man when all these accessories were removed.

"What are these for?" she whispered.

"We shall require them," he replied in the same tone.

"How? For what?" she asked; "will you not tell me?"

"In one moment, when I have seen that everything is here."

His arrangements were soon completed.

"Now," he said, "summon up your brave spirit, Nina; and if you quail at the thought of what is before, think of what you leave behind. If you are strong and courageous, all may be saved; if *you* fail, all are lost."

She pressed her two hands together as if clasping something between them.

"I am strong," she said, with quiet self-reliance. "I promise that I will not fail; and a Castellano never goes from his word."

"Listen then," said Claud, "but sit down," gently pushing her on to the stool, "there will be fatigue enough by-and-bye. I have told you, Nina, that on your courage hangs the fate of us all. You know who I mean. Myself and others who believe you innocent and have sworn to sacrifice their own lives rather than this unjust and horrible sentence be executed. If any trace of our flight be discovered, suspicion will instantly fall on them; then they are lost—only by a most ingenious contrivance for disarming suspicion can they hope to escape at all—while in reality in one place, they will seem to be in another. But this can only last for a few hours. If at the end of that time we have not escaped, either they must abandon us or perish themselves. Can you tell, Nina, which of the two they will choose?"

"They will perish," she answered quite calmly; but the deadly whiteness of her face, and the gleaming and flashing of her wonderful eyes showed that the calm surface covered something that boiled and surged below.

"And," continued Claud, impressively raising his hand, "I know, Nina, that they will *not* perish if any effort of yours can save them."

Nina's face relaxed a little, her eyes grew softer, and with the same emphatic calmness she echoed —

"They will *not* perish."

Claud saw that his words had had the desired effect.

"Now," he said, "I will tell you our project. We have discovered that in this room there is a trap door; a wonderful secret preserved from generation to generation, known only to the living head of the house and one old servant, and by them transmitted to their successors. It leads far underground, half through the city. Have you ever heard it rumoured?" he asked abruptly.

"Never," she replied amazed, "it can scarcely be; someone must have known and whispered of it."

"That we shall see," said Claud, "but all our hopes are bound up in it. We had to tell the old man who possesses the secret the

terrible strait his master's daughter was in before he would do anything to help us; once convinced that we spoke truth he became our ally. He asked where you were confined. We told him here. Then he revealed the secret of this passage. He said escape was possible, but only to stout hearts and iron nerves. Shall I tell you where the passage leads?"

She nodded silently.

"To a range of vaults where half Naples lies buried. I must tell you all, Nina. You will see, perhaps, terrible sights, such as strong men can scarcely bear; and if our light fails us—but we will not think of that—at any rate it is secure; they will never seek us there, and if we can only pass through courageously there is liberty at the end. I am well instructed in every turn to be taken through the catacombs; indeed I carry a plan, and our route marked. If fortune favours us we may reach the entrance in about two hours; it will be open, and our friends will be waiting at a little distance. If there is any refuge that you have already fixed upon it will then be easy to reach it; if not there will be a place of safety prepared for you. Say, Nina," and he looked anxiously in her face, "will you venture it? Will you trust to my efforts to save you? Will you try to save yourself and me?"

"I trust you in everything," she answered simply, "but have you considered ; in those vaults—the air" —

"Is bad enough," he interrupted, "but not sufficiently so to kill or even injure us for a short time. One or more of them are generally open for the purpose of interment, and the fresh air enters and penetrates partially all the passages. Yet I know it will be as much as we can do to press on and not give way. Have you courage, Nina? Can you venture? The path is a terrible one, but it leads from imprisonment and death to life and liberty. Let me see your face : look at me straight."

She had bent her head a little, as the horrors he only hinted at rose before her imagination. But now she looked up calm and strong, and spoke with wonderful self-possession —

"The light," she whispered, "will it burn there?"

"I hope so," he answered, "it is constructed for the purpose ; the oil is medicated" —

"If it should go out?" she broke in with strangely bright eyes fixed on Claud's face.

"Ah! Nina, dear Nina! we must hope the best. I see you cannot bear the thought of that loathsome dungeon to die in; but I could do nothing else—it was the only

chance. If at any risk I could have gained for you a less frightful mode of escape"—

"For me?" she echoed astonished. "Holy Saints! I was not thinking of myself, I was not caring for myself. Would not death met in those vaults, peaceful sinking into nothing, before hope had time to depart, be a merciful boon compared with the dreadful public execution, the pitiless soldiers, the agonised moments of waiting, the loud command, the crashing sound, and what next? Ah! Claud" (for the first time during their conversation she pronounced his name), "did you believe that I was thinking of myself? No, no, not myself—tell me, should the light fail, or we miss the way, or strength forsake us, then there is no escape?"

"None," he answered mournfully.

"Promise me," she continued, "if I should sink, and you remain strong, you will leave me and save yourself."

"I will not," he said firmly. "Nina, we succeed or fail together. I have brought you to this pass; I will share whatever befalls you."

Her face continued to brighten with some unexplained thought.

"Did you consider all this before you decided to come here?" she asked.

"I considered it all. Oh! Nina, the precious time is flying."

"One moment," she interrupted. "Did we not even venture this escape, you would still run terrible risk of discovery—of conviction?"

"It would be certain death," he answered calmly.

"And you knew that also, and yet came?"

"I knew it, and I came."

Nina made no answer with her lips, but in her heart she said —

"Look down from Heaven, O noblest of the angels, and see what your brethren upon earth can do!"

"But don't think of me," resumed Claud anxiously; "surely, Nina, your priests would exhort a little setting aside of self in a just cause."

She rose from her seat, lifted her head, and something divine looked out of her steadfast eyes.

"I will go," she said. "I have no fear; I will conquer the dangers; I shall have more than mortal strength this night."

She went hurriedly to the corner where the image stood, and, kneeling down, stretched her hands towards it in an agony of supplication.

"Not for me, O, Holy One—not for me!" were all the words she uttered. She came back quickly, and began to hurry Claud in his preparations with feverish anxiety.

His first care was to remove the table.

Then stooping down he passed his hand over the floor backwards and forwards several times. After a while he took an instrument, and, adjusting it apparently to the stone, worked it about for some minutes.

Pausing to rest a little, Nina could see a knob, square in shape and more than an inch in diameter rising from the stone.

Claud resumed his labours and dislodged an enormous screw. Searching some way off another of the same kind was found. This was speedily loosened. Then a square slab of stone was partially raised, and several wedges were discovered and pulled out.

At last the slab was entirely separated from the flooring, and both exerting themselves to the utmost, it was taken up and laid on one side without noise. Before them was a cavity about three feet square, with blocks of stone jutting from one side like steps.

"See," said Claud triumphantly, "the secret passage is no delusion."

Nina started, for a sound was heard near the door.

"There is no fear," whispered Claud, "remember, *that door must not be opened on any pretext whatever*. Cunning and villany are their own destruction for once. See now another advantage. These screws can be inserted again from the other side and securely fastened, so leaving no trace of

our mode of escape, but once fastened, they must be undone from here. That was why it was so necessary that someone should gain admittance to this room. Also the kind of map that I carry will guide us through the labyrinth if commenced from here, but is useless to one entering the vaults from outside. Now for the first effort."

He lighted the lamp he had brought, and lowered it into the opening. A black cavity, of which nothing was discernible but the huge steps, which being of a white stone, reflected the light. But this was only for a few yards down. Then all was darkness.

"I must go down first alone," said Claud, "and see what this leads to. I will return as quickly as possible."

Nina gasped and shivered a moment, and covered her white face with her hands, but removed them directly, and only the increasing depth and softness of her eyes, told the extent to which she was moved.

"Hold the lamp, dear Nina, for a moment, till I am safely in, then give it to me."

He swung himself into the cavity, placed his feet on the first block, and took the lamp from Nina's hand.

"Nina, if any mischance should befall me, there is yet a possible escape for you. If in ten minutes I do not return, descend here. First place the table over the opening, then draw the trap door into its place. It fits

perfectly, and even without the screws will not be observed by those who do not suspect its existence. I have brought food and wine independent of that provided for you. Bring it in. Seat yourself on the second step. You must wait without stirring till the time is past for the execution of your sentence. You will hear the tramping of feet, and voices in the room above you. But I forgot, before you come down, put on this dress that I have brought," he pointed to a roll of clothing that lay near, "it is the costume of our vivandières, they have admittance everywhere, and many of them are quite unknown. Throw your own dress and everything that I have brought down here, wait till nightfall, or as near to it as you can calculate, lift up this slab with both hands, you will move it easily, push it back, if it does not seem dark enough, draw it over again and wait a little longer. When it is dark, come out. This door will not be locked when there is no prisoner; the sentries, too, will be taken off, you can slip out unseen. Take the first chance of escape, you know the passages and doors better than I do, if you meet any of our men, give them a pleasant word and a joke; if you meet an officer, salute and hurry on. You will be almost sure to escape, at any rate it is a chance, and if it should be so, and we meet no more, then farewell, Nina,

and forget me quickly, for I am not worth remembering."

Nina looked fixedly at him while he was speaking, and when he had finished raised her hand as if bearing witness to some promise, but still said nothing. Claud looked anxiously in her face but saw there no consent to his words.

"You have understood me?" he said.

"Quite," she answered quickly. "Go now that you may return the sooner. Can I do nothing to help while you are gone?"

"Ah! yes. You can put on the other dress, and arrange all the things I have brought round the opening. It will save time in any case. On no account call to me. I will not remain a moment longer than I can help."

He began to descend. He held the lamp in one hand. A coil of rope was on the other arm. A flask of wine hung round his neck. Grasping the wall with the unencumbered hand, he reached the next step. Then the third, the fourth, still safely. Now the light grew faint; the air was close and the wall swerved a little which partially hid it. Nina laid herself upon the ground, and peered into the darkness which held for her more than life or death. The light now entirely disappeared; and the sound of Claud's retreating footsteps became an indistinct echo.

Nina rose with an effort, pressing her hands upon her heart to still the dreadful beating which almost choked her. The last faint sound had died away; utter darkness and silence reigned below.

Recovering after a little, she set herself to fulfil Claud's directions. His watch lay upon the table; she marked the hands, then carefully collected all the material he had brought, and arranged it in neat divisions round the trap-door.

Then she hastily assumed the vivandières dress; rolling her own garments into a small parcel to be disposed of anywhere. Then she drank a little wine, and again looked at the watch. Seven minutes out of the ten were gone.

She knelt down and gazed into the black abyss below. No light, no sound. She made a few more arrangements, walked softly up and down the room, paused before the image of the Virgin, but turned away again without speaking; her excitement was too great for any collected thought. Gradually out of the whiteness of her face, grew a round scarlet spot on each cheek. Her hands were deadly cold, her head hot and throbbing.

She looked at the watch again. Twelve minutes were gone! Again she laid herself down, and sent her very soul through her eyes to question the darkness and silence, but they gave no answer. Not a ray of

light, or a possible reflection came to comfort her.

She rose up and looked at the watch, seventeen minutes had lapsed. She clasped her hands.

"Three minutes more," she murmured, "three minutes—no longer."

Up and down the room she went, now quickly, now slowly, stopped at last, and examined once more the recording hands. Twenty minutes were gone.

She became calm and collected.

"I will go," she murmured. "If I live, I will save him," adding unconsciously the very words of Esther, "and if I perish—I perish!"

She took up a coil of rope, knotted a loop in one end, fastened the other tightly round an iron bar that jutted from the wall, possibly used for chaining a prisoner, lifted the lamp from the table and set it on the floor fastened the loop end of the rope round her waist, and prepared to descend through the trap-door.

As she stooped to examine the distance of the first step, a faint echo of sound seemed to come from below.

She put her ear as far down as she could and listened.

In a few seconds it came again. She lay still as death.

Now it returned, an indistinct sound,

but continuous. Louder now and nearer. Footsteps reverberating through the hollow ground. Presently something that was not light, yet not positive darkness struck upon her eyes. That too became plainer, the reflection of a distant gleam. Now she felt certain, and in a little time both footsteps and light were close at hand.

In an agony of joy, she saw Claud ascending the precipitous steps. Hastily she drew away, unfastened the rope from the bar, and from herself, replaced the lamp on the table, and returned to the trap-door to await him. He soon appeared, pale, panting, begrimed with dust, mould, and damp stains; but cheerful, hopeful, energetic; the lamp unextinguished and neither wound nor bruise upon him. With difficulty Nina stifled her cry of delight.

"You are safe — well?" she hurriedly asked.

"Safe and well," he replied, springing into the room. "The descent is far better than I expected. I have every hope. I could only go a little way; but we must trust to fate and our good stars for the rest. Were you frightened, Nina? I felt sure you would give me a little grace before coming down. Is all ready now? Ah! yes, everything, I see, just at hand; clever, thoughtful Nina; and splendidly disguised too," stepping back a little to look at her. "We may go at once; there

is no time to lose; help me now, hand me these things one by one."

He stepped back into the cavity, and loaded himself with the miscellaneous articles which lay round, and which Nina silently handed to him.

"I will leave these on the landing below," he said, "and return."

He descended with his burden, and was soon up again unencumbered.

"Now let me see," looking round, "is all right? It seems so. Let the lamp remain lighted, the food and wine on the table, and everything else as it is. Our disappearance will be unaccountable. Let those who love the marvellous have a real marvel to talk of. Now, dear Nina, courage! I will guide you down. Slip into the opening as I do—so; quite right."

Nina silently followed his directions.

"Now the first step."

She placed her foot where he pointed, clinging with both hands to the rugged wall.

"Now here."

She followed him step by step, he keeping a little below, and holding up the lamp for her guidance. It was difficult and dangerous work. The wall jutted out in all directions; the steps were uneven, sometimes slippery, sometimes broken; the light partial and deceiving, and withal it had to Nina a horrible feeling of descending alive into a tomb. But

nothing daunted her. These were only more reasons for courage and determination. She knew that Claud's safety as well as her own depended on her powers of endurance. Had it been only her own she might have given way; but the consciousness that his well-being was bound up in hers, gave her a miraculous strength.

She felt that nothing but positive death should prevent her from succeeding. She sharpened all her senses with the constant reflection that every danger she passed, every hurt she avoided, increased the chances of escape for him.

Claud's cautioning voice, warning her of stones, and cracks, and impediments of all kinds, was scarcely needed, so quickly did she see and put aside the obstacles in her way.

At last they reached the ground. Now the lamp, fed with medicated oil, began to show its powers. Dim in the upper air, it threw a steady light for some yards round the black darkness in which they stood.

Nina saw a vault of apparently infinite dimensions, for the shadows seemed to stretch away into boundless space. Roof, floor, and sides were all of solid rock, rugged in the extreme and of unequal height. The whole was evidently a natural formation, though on one side, in a sloping portion of the roof, a row of hollows at equal distances, looking

like a rough attempt at niches, gave some idea of man's handiwork.

Large stones were scattered about ; piles of dust and mould, and decaying fragments of undistinguishable matter, the accumulation of centuries, lay in all directions. The air was close and damp, but not disagreeable.

As soon as Nina was safely deposited on the rough floor, Claud turned to reascend the steps.

"I must go back," he said, "to close and fasten the trap-door. You will not fear the darkness, Nina, for a little while? I must take the lamp with me. Seat yourself on this stone. Don't stir for your life. I will be back before you have time to be frightened."

Nina seated herself. "Fear nothing for me," she said, "only be mindful of yourself."

He answered with a cheerful smile, and began again to ascend. A faint glimmer of light remained, just enough to make the darkness less palpable, less horrible.

She heard distant sounds, deadened by the massive walls, and guessed that Claud was refitting the trap-door to its place, and adjusting the screws. The sounds ceased, and the descending steps were heard again, and the light grew stronger. Claud reappeared with a look of satisfaction upon his face.

"Everything is done," he said, with a sigh of relief. "Nothing could be better. We

will rest a few minutes, and then fairly begin our journey. How do you feel, Nina? I quite enjoy the idea of puzzling the General and his satellites so completely; to say nothing of outwitting that incomparable villain."

And Claud's handsome face darkened with a fiendish frown.

"I know who you mean," said Nina; "why does he hate you so? And why does he wish to destroy me?"

The frown on Claud's face grew darker; he clenched his hand, and struck the air as if it were an enemy, muttering something which certainly was not a blessing.

"He wishes your destruction, Nina, simply because he discovered that it would be an effectual means of stabbing me, even if it did not result in my ruin as well; and he hates me because I stand in his path, and he cannot move me; he hates me because he would give his whole soul, if he has such a thing, for what I have got, and he can never attain to; he hates me because there is one thing on earth which neither money nor cunning can buy, and therefore he would steal it if he could, but can't, for I have it and keep it, and shall keep it, and despise him and his various villanies, and he knows it, and so hates me; for I have what he can never hope for" —

Suddenly Claud checked himself, looked

doubtfully at Nina, seemed to reflect, and then tried to assume a lighter tone.

But Nina was disturbed.

"And what is it?" she said, "that you have, and he can never hope for?"

"What?" he laughed, "Oh, many things, I fancy; better birth, better breeding, better principles; perhaps I might even say better looks; don't you think I might, Nina?"

Alas! Claud knew too well the power of those good looks, especially over poor Nina. She could only smile, and sigh, and smile again, giving a general assent to all he said.

"Tell me," she said, "how is it that you do not fear the discovery of the trap-door? You found it, others might."

"Impossible," he said, seating himself on an opposite stone. "I had the secret; no one else has. The stones are made to appear solid where they are divided, and divided where they are solid. Those enormous screws, which hold the whole machinery together are acted upon in a way different to all rules of masonry. Locksmiths, and blacksmiths, and carpenters, might work for hours, and only drive them tighter into their sockets, supposing even that they discovered them, which would be little short of a miracle. They are not to be seen, they are not to be felt. Only a peculiar pressure of the hand, placed in a particular position gives a clue to their whereabouts. A differ-

ence in the texture of the stone is the guiding mark, then a small stain; and at certain distances from this stain, which I learnt accurately—is one of the screws. I knew it was there, but neither saw nor felt it. I worked as I had been instructed, and succeeded. By an ingenious device, the screws can be inserted again from this side, by passing through a sort of tube in the stone. That is now done. The table stands over the trap-door; every article that could give a clue to us is removed. The lamp burns, the windows are barred safely, two sentries and the Officer of the Guard are stationed outside the door. Every possible means of escape is guarded against.

“Even if a secret passage were suspected it can never be discovered, for there is only this, and this is undiscoverable. Had we melted into air we could not more completely have baffled search or enquiry. When we emerge from these vaults, it will be at a part of the city so far removed from here as to be beyond suspicion; and the disguises we have assumed will take us safely anywhere. Look, Nina; you must get accustomed to a new companion.”

And throwing off the friar's gown, which till now he had kept wrapped round him, Claud showed himself in the uniform of a private of Irregular Cavalry, a regiment of which was stationed in the town.

"See here now, how well I will disguise myself." And pulling from one of the parcels the Capuchin's white beard, with the help of some sticky substance he disposed it into the shape of a most formidable pair of moustaches, which he fixed on to his lip; with a little manipulation the grey wig was made to assume quite a different appearance, half war-like, half dandified; and the Cavalry cap cocked sideways on the head surmounting all, completed the transformation.

Nina started up and stepped back half frightened.

"If I had not known—if I had not seen"—she stammered, "I could not have believed it possible. Even now I feel doubtful. Can that be the Capuchin who came into my prison just now; and can that Capuchin be the French officer who got into trouble this night by standing up against numbers, to take part with a helpless prisoner?"

Nina's eyes looked half smiling through their long lashes; she was pleased to let him see how well she remembered his bold defence of her and its consequences.

"Does the inner nature change correspondingly with the outer?" she asked, hoping that her question might draw some reassuring answer.

"I fear not," he replied gravely, removing the cap, wig, &c. "I believe under whatever shape I assume, I remain at heart the

same, a cruel, false, Frenchman, as you know you once called me, Nina."

Nina buried her face in her hands.

"Don't punish me by repeating it," she said, "I never thought it—never; I thought you like the pictures of the Archangel Michael; and was angry with myself for thinking so; but I acknowledge it now; and indeed to me you have been good and powerful as an archangel"—

"Hush, stop"! he exclaimed. "Don't liken me to anything angelic. I, the weakest, the faultiest of created beings. No, no, Nina; think of me still as a Frenchman; half vanity, half barbarity, and altogether selfish and worthless."

"You are *not*," she broke in with vehemence.

Cautiously he raised his finger and pointed to the room above.

"We may be heard," he said. "No more of this now. Another time I will tell you what I am. Then, you will believe me! Now we are rested, let us commence in earnest, for the worst is to come."

Nina rose obediently, without venturing another word. Claud made her drink some wine from the flask that he carried, and took some himself. Then he collected and examined all the paraphernalia that had been brought into the vault. The dress that Nina had taken off, the monk's gown that he had

himself worn, some of the ropes and instruments that he had used in first descending, were thrown aside. The rest made but a small parcel, which he slung on his arm. In one hand he took the lamp, and the other he held out to his companion.

“Courage, Nina; now we commence with the real dangers. Step where you see me step, pause when I pause. If you grow faint or sick tell me instantly, I have remedies. And one thing more. Should it chance that I am the first to sink, who can tell, I implore you, if you would give peace to my last moments, do this. Take from among these things a folded paper that you will find, it is the map of these vaults, study it a little, and follow its directions as well as you can. Take the lamp from my hand, you see it is fastened to the sleeve; I shall want it no more! Give me one word of farewell and leave me. Hurry on—try not to be horrified at the sights you may see; you will reach an opening at last; you will find means of ascent; outside are friends, they will recognise you; tell them not to attempt any useless efforts for me; they would destroy themselves, and I shall be beyond help. Will you promise me this, Nina?”

“No,” she answered, with as much strength as her choking voice could muster. “Listen to *me* now. If you sink, I stay beside you till you revive; Paradise itself could

not tempt me away. And if all that I can do is useless, and you revive no more, then earth has seen the last of me. If ten thousand doors of escape stood open before me, I would close them all, and remain here for ever. Heaven is my witness ! ”

She raised her hand and made the sign of the cross between herself and him.

Claud looked at her pale face and gleaming eyes with more admiration than he had ever bestowed on her most radiantly beautiful moments. But at the same time some strange feeling of misery seemed to master him, mind and body, leaving its unmistakable traces on his countenance.

He shuddered, drew himself together, and sighing, “ Good angels guard us both then ! ” took Nina’s hand in his own, and they commenced their strange and perilous journey.

CHAPTER VII.

SLOWLY, carefully went the fugitives, as pilgrims would, through an unknown land beset with dangers. For a short way the vault remained in the same condition as they had first found it; then it began to change. Narrow passages stretched right and left. Sometimes the roof was so low that they had to stoop painfully to avoid it; sometimes the passage so narrow that there was only room for one to pass at a time. Every now and then Claud stopped and examined the plan that he carried with him; sometimes he seemed puzzled, bewildered, almost scared; but carefully hid these feelings from his companion. Their conversation was restricted to necessary question and answer, warning, or encouragement.

When they had proceeded for about half-an-hour, arriving at a more open space than they had for some time traversed, they stopped to rest.

"You did not penetrate as far as this when you first came down?" said Nina questioningly.

"As far as this? No, indeed; not a fourth of the way," he answered, trying to speak cheerfully; "I only got as far as the

first passage leading from the large vault. I found that it corresponded exactly with the map, and, sure of that, returned."

"And does the way we have come correspond still?" she asked, her calm eyes fixed steadily on his.

"I think so; I hope so. But the map itself is difficult to understand, and the labyrinth so intricate and puzzling, that I can never be quite certain. But courage, we are safe from pursuit, at any rate. Drink some wine, Nina; then we will go on."

Now began the real difficulties of the way. The passages grew so numerous, that every moment they had to stop and calculate those already passed, and examine each one attentively for tiny landmarks by which to guide themselves. Sometimes the one to which all probabilities pointed seemed from its construction to be nothing but a cleft in the rock; sometimes after wandering for yards down a difficult path it closed abruptly, and they had to return and make a fresh search. Other troubles came upon them too. Pitfalls abounded. Large holes, apparently artificial, looking like gigantic graves, and of a depth impossible to ascertain, lay directly in their path, and they had to skirt round these snares on a ledge only a few inches wide; sometimes an enormous boulder would fill up the passage, and they had to climb over it into the darkness beyond,

doubtful as to what the other side might have in store for them. Sometimes for an immense distance their path was a pile of loose, pointed stones, which shook and wounded them at every step.

They were hot and faint with the toil, choked with dust, bruised and footsore. The lamp stood their friend nobly, burning brilliantly in the close dampness that surrounded them.

Soon a worse evil than any they had yet encountered made itself felt. The air grew thicker and damper, more mouldy and disagreeable, increasing every moment, till they were nearly stifled, and sick and giddy with the nausea it caused.

"What is it?" gasped Nina; "where does this lead?"

Claud turned quickly when she spoke; for some time he had carefully concealed his face from her.

She smothered a cry of terror as she looked at him. He was livid. Black circles round his eyes; large drops standing on his forehead; his voice was husky, and he breathed hard.

"You are ill," he said, speaking slowly and with effort.

"No," she answered quickly, "but the air is bad; have you not some remedies?"

They stood still. Claud searched in his scrip, and produced a small bottle.

"Use it carefully," he said in a languid voice, "I could not get more."

He shuddered; his hands trembled as he tried to wipe the moisture from his forehead.

"How is it to be used?" asked Nina in a tone of sharp agony.

"Inhale it, sprinkle it on your face, drop it on your lips." Then in a fainter voice he added; "Let us rest a little."

He sat down as he spoke, and leaned his head against the rock.

The bottle was tightly corked, and it was some seconds before Nina could open it. He watched her with sick and anxious eyes.

"Quick," he said, "you are white as ashes."

She drew out the cork, and went softly behind him. In a moment she had sprinkled it copiously on his face, and poured some drops between his lips.

"Nina," he exclaimed, starting up suddenly revived, "what have you done? There is only enough for you—why did you waste it upon me? What will you do for yourself"—

"See, then—am I not well?" she said with a bright smile, and so happy with the success of her experiment, that a slight colour flushed into her cheeks. "You are a soldier, monsieur; you think that women must swoon and cry out for a very little

thing; but is it so? Well, then," seeing that he looked distressed, "I will try it on myself." She touched her lips with it, and recorked the bottle. "Are you satisfied, monsieur?"

"More than satisfied with *you*, Nina; with your strength, and courage, and endurance. But I must have that bottle now; I cannot trust you to keep it."

"No," she said, "holding it back; "I will promise to use it if I in the least require it. Tell me, are we near?" —

"Yes," he said, answering her look, "we are close to the cemetery. These first vaults will be the worst. We must not lose our courage now; we must try, both of us, to keep well; we must not mind some horrors for a little while. Quick, dear Nina, let us loose no time. The air here is our enemy; farther on it will be better."

He consulted the map a moment, then turned briskly round.

"Here through this narrow crevice lies our path. The first vault is within here. Nina, I entreat you, let me bind your eyes, and lead you. You cannot bear what we may, perhaps, see."

"Not to save my soul," she said, putting aside the bandage. "What you can bear, I can."

"True, indeed," he said, with a sigh; "I am the weakest here. Let us venture in,

then, and get through as quickly as we can."

It was an opening in the rock, about two feet wide, and four in height. No one would have supposed it more than a fissure, or that a human body could possibly have made its way through.

They crouched down, Claud first, with the light, Nina following. As they approached the other end the unbearable odour became worse than ever. Some large stones were piled in the opposite opening. These Claud quickly dislodged, and they slipped through. One glance round they gave, and a horrible shudder passed over them both. They held their breath, and tried not to see what lay before them. The relics of mortality in every stage of decay. Coffins broken, bodies with no coffins at all, bones, skeletons, grinning skulls. With curdling blood and shivering limbs they tried to keep aloof from the horrors that surrounded them. Neither spoke. The mental loathing mastered the physical. The corrupted atmosphere was almost forgotten in the greater sense of shrinking disgust that overpowered the mind. Fortunately the middle of the vault was tolerably clear. They stepped across, obliged to go slowly to avoid what lay in their path. By great good fortune the corresponding opening out of this hall of corruption was

quickly found; it was blocked with large stones, like the first; these had to be moved one by one. Both worked bravely in spite of the horrible mould that had grown over every portion of the wall. The moment the passage was clear they darted through, glad to escape in any way from such a pestilential locality—such an embodied nightmare. They found themselves in an empty vault, and stopped for a moment to examine the way. So small and dark, and crooked were these narrow, passages, that only a person searching purposely would have detected them.

Claud proffered no remark concerning the terrible place they had just passed through, and Nina ventured no question, for their principal concern now was to get as far from it as possible.

The way was easily found out of this vault; then came another filled with coffins, and another and another, but none in the state of the first one. At last down a sort of lane with the rock on each side, and then with anxious looks Claud consulted his map, turned to the left, and examined carefully two or three parts of the wall. Finally he fixed on one part, took an instrument from his collection, and inserted it into the stone, worked it round and round, drew it out, and did the same thing in several places; great pieces of mortar or plaster, or some crumbly substance

fell with each trial, and soon a large block of the apparently solid granite detached itself from the wall and bounded to the ground.

At the same moment a delicious breath of fresh air was wafted through the opening. Two or three more blocks were divided from the wall in like manner. Then a space was formed sufficiently large for them to pass through. Using one of the fallen blocks as a step, Claud mounted to the breach he had made; Nina followed, and finding the distance less on the other side, both jumped lightly to the ground.

O joy! Through a crevice far above them they saw a twinkling star.

"The worst is over," said Claud, with a great sigh of relief.

"Our Lady be praised!" ejaculated Nina.

But though so happy in the prospect of deliverance, both were in a sad condition. Bruised, bleeding, sick and exhausted, it seemed as if they could go no farther. They sat down to rest. Nina drank some wine, but Claud turned from it with loathing. She saw it, softly uncorked the reviving elixir and again sprinkled the precious drops upon his face.

"Ah, Nina!" he exclaimed, while the same look of misery passed over him as had done once before. "Why will you do this? If you would think only of yourself, it would be a greater good to me. Suppose

you sink and fail in this awful desert, what am I to do for you? No help—no remedy. How am I to save you?”

“By saving yourself,” said her soft, clear voice. “What am I to do without *you*? What am I alone? You do not grudge me this small pleasure? No! I see then, you disdain my help? No! Then you fear that I shall want it, that is all; and I shall not want it; look at me, I am strong and well. Come, shall we try again? I feel that we approach the end.”

Her calm courage revived him as much as the stimulant.

“Nina! I must be weak indeed if I falter with you beside me. If all your countrymen were like you, not a Frenchman would ever have set foot on Italian ground. Fervently do I wish that they never had!”

Nina did not echo the wish. Suddenly she exclaimed —

“Your hand bleeds—I will bind it.”

With a strip of her handkerchief she bound it. She held his wrist as she did so.

“You have fever” she said calmly, laying her finger on his pulse; “is it from this close air—or heat, or fatigue?”

“Neither,” he answered abruptly, “it is only worry, anxiety; there is so much to do, and to fear, so little to encourage; but, forgive me Nina, I will be more cheerful when I see you nearer safety.”

He examined the lamp as he spoke ; in the fresher air they now breathed it burnt dim and sickly."

"It will not last long," he said, "we must hurry."

They rose, and looked anxiously about for an opening from the vault they were in, which was empty, with passages branching off like the rest.

After careful examination, and comparison with the map, Claud chose one of these passages.

"This must be it," he said.

It was wide, and they passed through easily. More vaults, more passages, more intricate, puzzling, bewildering labyrinths. Sometimes the air was thick and nauseous indeed, but nothing ever to compare with that first chamber of horrors. Presently the atmosphere became suddenly purer, and squeezing themselves through a passage which literally was only a crevice in the rock, they entered a large vault evidently belonging to some noble family, from the rich trappings of the coffins, and the armorial bearings embroidered on them.

Here they discovered the cause of the freshness. Far up in the wall was an opening about three feet square, and down through it rushed a delicious cool breeze, laden with the scent of roses, myrtle, orange-

blossom, and every other sweet shrub from the luxuriant garden above.

"Oh Paradise!" exclaimed Nina, but suddenly stopped. "How comes that opening?" she whispered.

"There will be a funeral to-morrow," replied Claud in the same tone, seating himself wearily, and leaning his head on his hand, while Nina deftly brushed from his shoulders the accumulated dust; "they have commenced opening the vault, and have not had time to finish. Hush! what was that?"

The opening was suddenly blocked up by something like a human figure. In a moment it disappeared, and a wild cry rang far through the night till lost in the distance.

"We have been observed," said Claud in great agitation. "Someone has been watching the vault, and seen our light. We must get away as quickly as possible."

Hurriedly they sought an egress, and leaving the sweet air behind them, went headlong through it, and on, on, running and stumbling through chambers and passages, barely stopping to mark the way till they considered themselves at a safe distance from discovery. They never knew how wild a tale had run through Naples the day following, concerning two spectres which had been seen wandering about the vault of an illustrious family, partially opened for the interment of

one of its members, and reported to be the phantoms of two unhappy lovers, who had perished some centuries back while exploring a line of catacombs supposed to exist in the neighbourhood of these vaults, but the clue to which, even if they did exist, was gone from the memory of man. They never knew how distinctly they had been seen and thoroughly described. Their pale faces, distressed manner, and weary glances, that seemed to question the walls around for means of escape. How they had appeared suddenly through the solid rock; he first, holding a dim light; she following and seeming to cling to him; how the unhappy spirits had seated themselves; how the one had buried his face in his hands; and the other, leaning over his shoulder, appeared striving to comfort him; how at last she had prevailed, and they rose again, and hand in hand commenced another cycle of hopeless wandering.

All this had been seen and told, for it was a well-known tradition in that neighbourhood, the tale of the unfortunate pair who had descended into the catacombs, full of life and happiness, scorning the service of a guide, carrying their own light, laughing at the warnings of their friends, and never returned again!

Two men had been set to watch the vault. One lying on the ground and looking down

had seen the light appear, and the figures with it; after making quite sure of his eyesight, he had softly called his companion, and bade him look down also. But the latter, terrified, fled shrieking away, leaving the first alone, who, though shaking with dreadful anticipation, was yet so fascinated by the strange and melancholy sight, that he forced himself to remain and see the end.

Long was this awful appearance spoken of in Naples; for the man who had witnessed it, was one chosen especially for his honesty and truthfulness, to say nothing of courage and common sense. One neither to be led away by fancy, nor deceived by fear, and his statement corroborated by the other man who had fled back to his house wild with fear, gained instant and lasting credit. The old women shook their heads and muttered —

“ Ah! this love-making, see what it comes to.”

The priests nodded gravely, and spoke of unexpiated sin, and the Church's pardon; and the young girls listened with blanched lips to the tale of the unhappy *spiriti erranti*, and each wondered if she should be so lost with Paulo, or Giuseppe, or Andrea, would their restless souls so traverse the vaults and catacombs and chambers of middle earth throughout eternity?

And many were the prayers put up by

pious and pitiful hearts for the hapless spirits which had appeared in the vault that night, and never in truth did wandering souls stand more in need of them, and not the less that they were still cumbered with their mortal bodies.

Those weary bodies were now at last cheered with the prospect of rest, for they had arrived at a square chamber, fresh and breezy; empty, but evidently in preparation for becoming the last resting-place of humanity. Niches and shelves were half formed, tools lay about, piles of fresh hewn stone were scattered here and there, and, oh joy of joys! at the further end a large practicable opening, and a flight of steps leading up to it.

Through this opening came a flood of silver moonlight; but not a sound was heard beyond the sighing of the wind and soft rustling of the trees.

"Our work is done—we are safe!" whispered Claud joyfully. "This is the further cemetery, more than a mile distant from the one where we were seen. Oh, Nina! this is heavenly. The blessed moonlight, the sweet air, life and liberty. But we have something to do yet. Come this way."

He led her past the opening to a point where the rock jutted out and completely hid them, even from anyone who might have entered the vault.

"Here," he said, "we will make our last arrangements."

From the little parcel, now much reduced in size, for several things had been used or flung away on the road, he took the few things necessary to complete his own disguise. These were soon fitted on. Nina then received some finishing touches. They brushed and dusted their soiled garments, drank the remainder of the wine, which Claud no longer refused, then sat silent for a few minutes, resting quietly in the delicious cool air.

Once or twice Claud looked furtively at Nina, and half-opened his lips as if to speak, but either his intention wavered, or his courage failed, or in some way he thought better of it, for he said nothing.

He rose at last, and consulting his map went to the further end of the vault and sought about carefully.

"What are you searching for?" said Nina, following him. "Surely this is the end of the cemetery."

"No doubt of it," he replied, "but I am looking for a well, or rather a fathomless hole supposed to have been one. It ought to be somewhere about here. Ah! there it is. Everything that is left must be thrown down here."

He dropped into it some small article. No sound came from below.

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"What a depth it must be," he said, with a slight shudder.

He threw heavier things; still no sound. Everything was thrown. The flask that had held the wine, the instruments, the ropes; all that might remain as witness of their terrible journey were flung down, but might be still falling to this day for all they knew, for no sign of their reaching the ground ever arrived.

"Good," said Claud, "they are in safe keeping."

The last thing to go was the lantern.

"Kind friend," said Nina, almost caressing it, "you have been our guardian angel; go, and rest for ever, having well done your appointed work."

She blew out the dying flame, and leaning over the cavity gently dropped it down.

Now they were in total darkness. Together they groped their way to the moonlight, and noiselessly ascended the steps.

When Claud's head came to a level with the opening, he stopped and narrowly scanned the surroundings. Everything was silent and motionless as death. He crept out, keeping in the shade, and Nina followed.

Correspondingly black with the brightness of the moonlight, was the shadow of the rock in which they stood. Having crawled along half crouching in the darkness for some way, they seated themselves. They were

now a good distance from the open vault. Had anyone passed they would have seemed merely passengers resting in the middle of a moonlight journey. But not a footfall approached.

At last they rose up, and boldly stepped into the light.

Their first care was to get clear of the cemetery. That was soon done, and no one encountered as yet. As they left the cemetery behind them, Nina turned with a shuddering sigh, and looked her last at the calm surface which had covered their hours of agony. Now they walked briskly along.

Nina glanced anxiously at Claud, but his face was so disguised that she could not tell if the pallor upon it was the effect of the moonlight, or illness.

Had dozens met them they would have excited no surprise; a grizzled trooper, and a pretty vivandière, probably his daughter, returning from some festa beyond the town, was no unusual sight.

The cemetery was now far behind. They came among houses, mostly small and mean; then to a church, where Claud stopped.

"In here," he said.

They lifted the heavy apron and entered. Before the high altar was a coffin on tressles. Two priests were sprinkling it with holy water, and muttering a sort of chant; a mourner kneeled at the head.

They entered silently. No one even looked round. Claud turned into a small chapel on the right, and they took their station by a massive pillar.

While he anxiously scanned all the aisles and corners and nooks that he could see, Nina knelt down, and facing a Madonna on the wall, gave heartfelt thanks for her miraculous escape that night.

As she rose up, she almost screamed with terror. A swarthy Bedouin, in white burnous and slippered feet, was standing before her, looking straight into her face.

At her exclamation, Claud turned round, and was about to draw her away, when a voice in good French said —

“Don’t you know me? Why, Claud, I knew you.”

“Great Heavens! Chevelure, how well disguised! Is all right?” he asked eagerly.

“As yet, yes. But there is no time to lose. We almost despaired. Go at once to the place we arranged. Change your things like lightning; show yourself everywhere you can. Leave mademoiselle to me. I am safe now. Is it possible that both are alive and well? I can scarcely believe my eyesight. I dare not ask any questions now. Brandenburg waits you outside.”

All this in hurried, decisive words. Then he whispered in Claud’s ear —

“Have you told her?”

"No," said Claud, changing colour, "there was no opportunity."

"You should have made one," said Chevelure gravely.

"Impossible," replied Claud; "you little know what we have gone through. We never spoke but for positive necessity; besides," he added nervously, "I don't think it would have been wise. The surprise, the agitation—in short I think it would only have caused harm. I fear she would not have borne up so well."

Chevelure turned a moment towards Nina, with a glance full of interest.

"I wish it had been otherwise," he said; "but we cannot help it now. You must do it in writing, if you are unable to see her for some time. Go at once, as quickly as you can; I tremble for every moment's delay."

Claud went back to Nina.

"I must leave you," he said, "dear Nina, for the present; but I leave you to the care of my best friend, Colonel Chevelure, who has already done more than half of this night's work. He will see you safe at the cost of his life, if necessary. Follow his directions as you would my own. You remember him, Nina. You will trust him? You cannot guess all that he has done for you."

"Remember him?" she said. "Can I

ever forget him ? Trust him ? I would follow him blindfold ! ”

“ Tell him,” resumed Claud, “ where you wish to go, and how a letter may reach you. I have many things to say to you—there is no time now. When this has all blown over I will see you again. Now farewell, good, brave, unselfish Nina ! May Heaven, if Heaven is no fable, watch over you ! ”

He took her two hands in his own, lightly kissed them, and disappeared through a side door which Chevelure pointed out.

Nina and Chevelure remained alone. The latter did not speak, feeling for the first time in his life embarrassed. But Nina soon broke the silence.

“ Signore, I know you for a noble and generous friend ; I trust you entirely. What am I to do ? ”

Chevelure recovered his voice and his presence of mind together.

“ First, mademoiselle, will you envelope yourself in this ? ”—producing from the folds of his burnous a similar garment, only smaller and lighter. “ Your present dress and mine would not pass unquestioned along the streets of Naples. This, too, must come off,” touching the vivandière’s cap which Nina wore ; “ we will hide it somewhere.”

Nina removed the cap, and, assisted by him, disposed the burnous in such a manner

that it formed both cloak and veil ; of her whole face only one eye was visible. Never was disguise more complete.

"Now these," continued Chevelure, producing a pair of yellow Morocco slippers with turned up, pointed toes. "Those are scarcely suitable," looking with a smile at Nina's black shoes and silver buckles, which she had not changed when assuming the vivandière's dress.

In a moment she had slipped off the offending shoes, and replaced them with the awkward and hideous slippers.

"I am afraid I shall not walk in them very well," she said doubtfully. "If I were not so tired perhaps" —

"So tired !" he echoed, his eyes full of anxiety and pity ; "and I dare not let you rest a moment. Though at present you are safe, I can have no peace till you are beyond the possible reach of your enemies. Tell me, mademoiselle, is there any place of safety that you would prefer ? If you have not yet thought of one, I can take you to a sure refuge till you decide on some plan."

Nina had long ago decided what her course should be.

"I know where to go," she said, "if I could only get there. I was on my way to it when" —

She stopped, not knowing how to continue.

Chevelure waited a moment to see if any explanation would follow ; as she said no more, he went on —

“And you know the way, and are sure of safety there?”

“Once in the Strada Toledo I know my way perfectly ; and there is certain safety for me when it is reached. One thing only is wanting. Can you tell me”—a look of pain crossed her face as the events of the night occurred to her—“that letter which was found on me, I know not how, I remember nothing—it is all blank ; what was the direction ? I never looked at it ; if you could recollect” —

“There was no direction,” he replied ; “nothing but seven long scratches. I counted them carefully.”

“Seven—you are quite sure?”

“As sure as that I have eyesight, and see you, mademoiselle, before me now.”

“That will do,” she replied ; “now I remember. The number I was told was on the letter. And there was no clue,” she added anxiously, “as to the destination of the letter?”

“Not the faintest,” he answered impressively ; “have no fear upon that point.”

“Then there I will go,” she said. “Shall we move now ? If you can take me to the Strada Toledo, I can do the rest.”

She moved a step or two as she spoke ;

between dreadful weariness, bruised feet, and the ungainly slippers, she stumbled every moment.

"I am afraid I shall betray myself," she said with a piteous smile.

"There is no fear," he answered quickly. "The walk of an Arab woman in slippers is only an awkward shuffle; without them they move gracefully. Would that I dared procure some conveyance, but it would be too great a risk. We will go very slowly, and choose the softest paths we can find. So we will set off. Forgive me, mademoiselle, if I tell you that you must keep just a step behind me. It is a barbarous custom, existing still among some savage nations, for men to take precedence, but in this emergency I must yield to it. Now," whispering, "shall I go?"

Nina nodded. They moved forward.

"Imitate what I do," he said softly.

The swarthy Bedouin marching first, and the veiled woman shuffling behind, were quite in keeping with the characters they represented; and though it may be supposed that they were very much out of place in a Christian church at that hour of the night, or rather morning, in reality it was not so. Troops of Arab pilgrims were often to be seen wandering about Naples, peering in their listless way into every place where they could gain admission, with a sort of

lazy, persevering curiosity, quite eastern in its nature. Even the churches they would often enter, gaze stolidly about them for a few moments, and then silently disappear. No one interfered with them; their habits were so strange, often sleeping in the day and rambling stealthily about at night, that their appearance at any unusual time or place would never be remarked.

Noiselessly they slipped through the apron, Nina, at a sign from her companion, carefully abstaining from any reverential attitude which might betray her Christian creed.

Out now into the lovely moonlight, flooding alike land, sea, and mountain; looking as if cruelty, treachery, and misery could have no existence where it fell. Nina began to feel more secure. Who would suspect in the listless, shuffling, Arab woman, the peasant girl supposed to be fast in prison, or the sprightly vivandière, seen on the Cemetery road not an hour before?

As they walked in the order which Chevalure had enjoined, they contrived to hold an animated conversation in a murmuring tone, so that the language they spoke would not be detected even by anyone listening.

Nina related the outline of their adventurous escape; and heard in return the details of how it had been arranged.

She tried to express her gratitude and

obligations to the friends who had done and dared so much for her, but her voice broke every time in the attempt, and she could not get on.

Moreover, Chevelure was evidently so distressed whenever she made any allusion to it, that that alone would have prevented her from saying the half that she wished.

She told him of their terrible distress in the first vault, asking the cause of the state it was in.

"Ah!" said Chevelure, drawing a long breath, "if that could have been avoided! But it could not. It lay straight in the road. There was no other way. We feared that more than all the rest together. It is a detached vault, in reality far from the others, where numberless patients from a fever hospital were buried. The fever was virulent and infectious, and latterly grew so bad that the poor bodies were interred in any sort of covering that was easiest obtained; sometimes with nothing more than a roll of sacking round them. When the fever was over, the vault was completely walled up, not to be opened again for two or three years. It is marvellous that you lived through it."

"I can imagine nothing more horrible," said Nina, "but how is it that this subterranean range exists unknown? Those who enter the vaults must surely see the openings."

“ I fancy not,” he replied. “ We were told that the rock was full of fissures, some larger, some smaller ; they are not supposed to lead anywhere, but to some cavity beyond, or perhaps not even that ; and even if it was suspected that they led further, who would have the interest or the courage to explore them ? Ah ! mademoiselle, can you believe our anxiety these last hours, knowing the dangers, fatigues, and horrors you must pass through, the small chance of escape, the possibility of the whole subterranean, being a fable, and even, if true, that a lingering and horrible death must be your inevitable fate ? We waited, a friend and myself, at a short distance from the last cemetery. We had so arranged with Claud, that if any mischance happened to one or the other, the survivor should seek us there ; but if both issued unhurt from the caverns, you should hasten on to the church. But that was a result we never expected or looked for. The utmost we could hope for you, mademoiselle, was strength to reach the last vault. Claud would there have sought us, and we had remedies and a conveyance at hand. But this would have involved much delay and possible treachery ; for we must then have employed other agents, and even heavy bribes are not always binding. But when time passed, and we received no sign, we hastened on to the church at the bare chance of such

a miraculous result as the escape of both unhurt. Can you conceive, mademoiselle, my joy and amazement when I saw both standing beside that pillar? In truth, for a few moments it prevented me from speaking. Our efforts were more than rewarded."

"Why are you so kind to me?" asked Nina abruptly, dropping her veil and looking up into his face. "Why do you take such trouble, give yourself such anxiety about me—a foreigner, a stranger?"

A most indescribable look answered her own.

"Foreigner—stranger," he echoed, "that can scarcely be. All my life I have worshipped what is noble and beautiful. Whatever form it appears in, I welcome my old idolatry. And as for trouble and anxiety, for more than twenty years I have not known the exquisite pleasure that I have tasted this night. I was young then, a mere boy. One day I found the son of a neighbour, whose estate joined my father's, torturing a poor little peasant child by making her carry enormous stones, to assist him in passing the overflowing brooks and rivulets swelled by the rain, and in which he was too delicate, forsooth, to wet his dainty feet. The child was a fragile little thing, ill too, and, with bleeding feet and strained muscles, could not keep up with her savage master, who, whenever she faltered, struck her with a riding

whip that he carried. I saw all this from a distance before I came up with them."

Chevelure stopped speaking abruptly, and such a ferocious expression crossed his face that for a moment Nina felt almost afraid of her giant protector. But her interest in the tale he was telling was too great for silence.

"What did you do?" she asked breathlessly.

"What did I do? I seized him by the collar as I would a dog, thrashed him within an inch of his life, flung him into the mud, and left him there, and carried the child home."

"Oh, brave!—oh, noble!" ejaculated Nina, while tears of excitement started from her eyes. "I wonder no longer at what I have seen this night. It is well for me that my debt of gratitude is to such as you, signor, for how can I ever repay it?"

"Ah, mademoiselle! easily. Think leniently of our nation. Do not think us all bloodthirsty tyrants. And if you should ever have it in your power to befriend a Frenchman, for our sakes do it."

"Heaven so deal with me," said Nina fervently, "if I spend not willingly health, wealth, life itself to do a service to a Frenchman!"

At this moment they turned from the obscure street they had been traversing to one wider and better built.

"We are close to the Toledo," said Chevelure warningly, "we must be careful; we shall meet passengers."

They instantly resumed their Arab style of locomotion, which they had gradually abandoned in the lonely streets. They met a few wandering figures who scarcely noticed them.

All along the streets, stretched on mats, small mattresses, and even the stone itself, lay numerous sleepers, full in the moonlight, and the travellers had to step warily to avoid stumbling over this recumbent humanity; now and then one would raise his head, mutter a few words, and lay it down again.

On they went at the same dreamy pace, not daring to move quicker lest suspicion should be aroused. At last they crossed into the Toledo. Nina noticed that it was close to the spot where she had turned to follow the riders the evening before. The evening! Was it possible that only a few hours had elapsed since that time? Years, ages, might have passed comparing the Nina of then with the Nina of now.

Buried in her own thoughts she silently followed Chevelure, till the latter turning, said softly —

"Mademoiselle, do you mark the way?"

Nina had forgotten that she was now the guide.

"The archway supported by lions is what I seek," she said.

"Ah, that then is a little farther on."

They went on, and in a few minutes the archway, white and massive in the moonlight, the lions gigantic and awful in their grim repose, rose before them.

Chevelure looked at his companion to point the way, but she did not move, and for a moment did not even speak. At last she said —

"We part here, signor; Nina must bid you farewell!"

"Not here, surely," he exclaimed; "not till I have seen you in safety; I cannot—I will not—"

"I *am* safe," she replied; "I know where to go. I cannot miss the way. I am thinking now, signor, of *your* safety. I am not blind to the risk you run. I know that morning must be at hand, and every moment is precious. I entreat you to leave me now, and think only of yourself."

"Not if the Emperor and his whole Court were at my heels," he exclaimed with such vehemence that Nina raised her hand with a warning gesture; "not till I know you to be secure from all possible harm will I lose sight of you for a single instant."

"But," she resumed anxiously, "putting your own safety aside, it will be better for me—it will, indeed. If you come with me

how am I to account for you? I dare not tell all that has passed this night."

"But to friends, why not?" he asked with surprise.

"Must not the secret of the subterranean be kept at any risk?" she said quickly.

"It need not be mentioned," he replied; "give no detailed account at all. Say that on your way you got into some trouble, and I assisted you. That will be simple truth. Say that you were frightened by some soldiers, took refuge in a church, and that I, seeing you in difficulty, offered to accompany you home. That is natural enough, and quite true."

"Ah, signor! you cannot understand. We Italians are blinded by our misery. There are those among my friends who would rather that I lay dead before them than owe my life to a Frenchman."

Chevelure could quite understand this, and also how difficult it might be for Nina to make known the whole history of her night's adventures, especially the root of it all, her concealment in the Castellano Palace.

Even to him, who knew so much, she had shrunk from touching on that point; and to others, to whom every detail must be explained, it would be still more embarrassing.

"But," he resumed quickly, "let me, at any rate, be sure that you are safe under some roof; until then I have not fulfilled

my trust. I must not, I dare not leave you in the street alone at this hour, uncertain as to whether you have found shelter or not. Let me stand here in the shade and watch. I will keep you in sight till I see you enter the house. You are sure that you know it ? ”

“Number seven, Piazza d’Oro,” she answered promptly. “Is not this turning the Piazza d’Oro ? ”

“It is, and the house will be the seventh down, for this corner is number one. I can distinguish it from here. But, mademoiselle, surely I shall hear of you again, of your health, your welfare; and you, too, will you not have some interest in knowing how we have sped ? ”

“Ah! how much,” she said, clasping her hands. “But how am I to learn? I shall know partially what happens in the city, but nothing certain. I cannot even say,” she continued hurriedly, “by what name a letter would reach me; but you know where I am; perhaps you might contrive” —

Chevelure hastily interrupted her.

“Mademoiselle, look, the moonlight is paling, the east is grey, hasten, for Heaven’s sake, even now all might be lost ! ”

Nina startled, looked at the sky. It was true. The cold grey glimmer of morning was beginning to overpower the rich southern moonlight.

She gathered her burnous about her and looked down the street; not a figure was stirring.

"If I should be mistaken?" she said in great agitation, "what am I to do?"

"Return to me at once, I will take you to a refuge which no one can remove you from. Oh, hasten, quick, I hear sounds."

"I go," she said. "Farewell, signor. I need not stop for words of gratitude, for no words could express mine. Goodness such as yours is beyond earthly power to requite. Surely the angel who records the noble deeds done upon earth, has this day written your name in the eternal pages. I leave you with the prayer that in your every need, may God so deal with you, as you have dealt with me!"

With a sudden movement she stooped and kissed his hand; then, wrapping herself in the folds of her white mantle, glided through the pale moonlight like a spectre.

Chevelure, standing in the shade, anxiously watched. She reached the door; he heard her knock loudly. Sooner than might have been expected a head was thrust from an upper window and a short parley took place.

Still keeping in the shadow, Chevelure crept nearer. The head quickly disappeared, and the door was opened. More talking. Then unmistakable tones of joyful welcome. Nina, still visible on the doorstep, turned

suddenly round in the direction where he stood, and held up her hand, as if feeling the wind, or pointing to the moon.

The next moment she disappeared inside the house. The door was shut, locked, and bolted. Total silence reigned.

"She is safe," he murmured ; and strangely enough with that consoling thought the moonlight grew dull, the air became cold, and he felt very spiritless and miserable.

After waiting a little while he quietly stole down the street, attentively regarding the house as he passed. It was dark and silent. He passed once again, paused, sighed, and, hastily turning into an obscure alley, took a circuitous route to his own destination.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE first streaks of dawn which lighted Nina to her long-sought shelter, were peeping through the small window of a charcoal-burner's hut, in the depths of a forest some miles from Naples.

Near the window was a table, and by it a man was seated, poring over papers and maps, and occasionally directing watchful glances towards a settle at the further end of the little chamber, roughly arranged with straw and cloaks as a bed. On it lay another man in a disturbed sleep, starting up at times and calling out, and again relapsing into heavy slumber. At last the starts and exclamations became so frequent and delirious that the watcher went up and gently shook him.

He moaned and muttered, then became quiet, and seemed to sleep easily for about a quarter of an hour.

The other returned to the table and was soon buried in his papers. Again the sleeping man became restless, the veins in his forehead swelled, he tossed his arms, and seemed to struggle with something. The other man watched him anxiously.

Presently, with a groan that was almost a

shout, he started up, grasping the edge of the settle and staring wildly.

Recovering in a few seconds he sank back on the pillow, turning his languid eyes to the man who sat by the window.

"Have I been dreaming?" he asked.

"I should say yes, Eccellenza," replied the other; "you were disturbed, slightly convulsed; I feared the fever was returning."

"Did I talk, did I call?"

"Well, yes, in a delirious way, nothing distinctly. How are you feeling, I hope not worse."

"No, I think not; I am better, but I have had a horrible dream. A dream I can scarcely believe it, so vivid and circumstantial, but happily impossible. I must get up, this is too hot."

"Wait," exclaimed the other, hurrying towards him, "you will disarrange the bandages."

Then carefully removing the coverings he began examining and tightening several bandages, two on one arm, one on the shoulder, another on the head. When the dressings were replaced the wounded man rose with difficulty, and leaning on his companion moved towards the window, and sat down facing the east which was now rapidly brightening.

The other seated himself opposite, and re-

commenced his examination of the papers, dividing his attention between them and his friend. By-and-bye the latter spoke.

"How soon shall I be rid of all this?" pointing to the bandages.

"In a few days at farthest," was the answer; "that is if you will follow my directions. But, forgive me, Eccellenza, you are a very trying patient."

The other smiled faintly.

"Can you wonder," he said, "at my anxiety? At this moment when activity is so necessary to be laid aside like a log."

"Patience," was the reply; "it might have been much worse. Less than a week will see you all right again. The time is not so very important. You have good agents and you are safe."

The wounded man sighed, closed his eyes, and leaned his head against the window. He was about forty years of age, tall and commanding, with features refined and intellectual. Black hair, thick and curling; eyes almost threatening from the intensity of shadow that lay in them, and from which now and then leapt a momentary lightning. He was deadly pale, but this might be the effect of fatigue or loss of blood. Presently he looked up again.

"Doctor, I have had a dream. Can your science tell me how much of it is real?"

The other shook his head.

"Perhaps I can tell you how much of it is *not* real. Let me hear it."

"It was so terribly distinct," said the sick man, "I seem to see it now. I dreamt that I saw my daughter stand on the edge of a precipice; a black abyss below. The ground was crumbling under her feet, and she clung for support to a man wearing the usurper's hateful livery. Malediction! Yes, a Frenchman."

He frowned heavily and the gloomy lightning showed itself in his eyes. The listener smiled calmly.

"Very natural," he said, with eyes that slightly twinkled; "in such a position, even if it were reality, and no dream, under the circumstances I would cling to Lucifer himself if no one else were at hand."

"But that was not all," resumed his companion. "I thought that struggling with despair and something that held me back, I succeeded at last in getting near enough to make my voice heard. I called to her to abandon the Frenchman and throw herself towards me. She refused; and I then perceived that she stood on firmer ground than he did; though he appeared to support her, she in reality was supporting him. I called again and again, and bade her obey me; she pointed to the figure beside her and refused to leave him. I threatened her with my

curse, with the ban of the Church, with the anger of our Lady, lastly with her own utter destruction, soul and body; but for only answer she stooped down and drew the Frenchman farther up on to the firm ground where she stood. At that moment I felt the earth tremble; the rocks divided; for one second I saw Nina and her hateful companion, hand in hand on the edge of the precipice, the next, she was alone, slipping slowly but surely into the abyss. I cried out in my agony, she lifted her eyes to me, sad but peaceful. The land slipped with a crash, she was gone!

"I woke up, but the eyes were still there, here in this room, close beside me, looking into mine! Nothing else, only the eyes. By degrees they faded away. Doctor, it was a frightful dream"—he shuddered—"worse, it was a reality!"

"It was a nightmare," said the Doctor quietly. "And was that all—nothing more? What of the Frenchman?"

"Of him? Hateful slave!" Muttered imprecations followed. "I saw him no more, but had a vague idea that he escaped the ruin around. I remembered nothing but the horrible look in her eyes. She seemed satisfied with his safety rather than her own. If I could think, if I could believe, that she"—

He struck the table with his clenched

hand, rose abruptly, and commenced striding across the room.

"Duke, Duke!" exclaimed his companion, "what are you doing? See the mischief that you have caused."

He pointed to the bandages. They were moved; the arm was bleeding.

"Now you have put yourself back for twenty-four hours. Sit down. Let me arrange this."

He busied himself with the bandages, and went on talking.

"You ask me how much of your dream is real; I will tell you. You have fever; you are half delirious; your head swims; that is the precipice. You are planning destruction to the French; that is the abyss where your Frenchman stood. Besides this"—and he cast a sidelong glance at his companion—"you are in some special anxiety about your daughter. Your mind runs equally on political plans and her welfare, which is in some way connected with them; in the confusion of a dream they naturally unite. That is the amount of reality in it, no more. There"—releasing the wounded arm—"it is all right now. Keep yourself quiet. Things are going well. You can be spared for a day or two. Why are you so impatient?"

"I have more reasons for impatience than you are aware of," said he who answered to the title of Duke. "I ought to see Father

Francesco. His letters of late have been full of mysterious hints, the last one explanatory, but startling, and all concerning my daughter."

"Indeed!" said the Doctor; "and what mystery can the signorina be concerned in?"

"She, poor child! Nothing. But the current sweeps her away in its course as well as others. Good friend and physician, I will trust you with this as I have with many another secret. Possibly you may assist me here as you have often done before. I find that Father Francesco has laid a plan worthy of Loyola himself—magnificent, but at first sight a little too—too"—

The Duke hesitated; the right word seemed difficult to find.

"A little too sweeping in its results, perhaps," said the other. "Just so. I know the good Padre's comprehensive views on some points. He sees, that is, he *fancies* he sees, the end from the beginning, and considers that that end justifies any means. I understand. You are not prepared to go quite the lengths that he would."

"You have just touched it," said the Duke. "I am not quite prepared; yet the design is splendid. If it could only be carried out without"—

Again the word stuck in his throat.

"I understand perfectly," was the re-

joinder. "Might I hear the plan? Your Excellency knows that I am a bad soldier, and but a poor statesman. Truly I am but a physician; yet I might possibly tell if the plan is a healthy one."

"Healthy? Ah! Strictly speaking I fear it is not quite that. But you shall hear. You know that I have had my daughter educated purposely in a convent of French refugee nuns, that she might from her childhood imbibe principles of hatred and revenge against the abominable Corsican and his followers. My efforts have succeeded. Nina hates the French—that is, the Imperial French—to such a degree, that I feel sure she would hesitate at *nothing* that would ensure the destruction of a Frenchman."

"But what can she do?" said the other gravely. "Is not her future sealed?"

"No, not irrevocably. She has fulfilled her noviciate, and would have taken the veil long before this, at her own most urgent entreaty, for I was myself averse to it, but these troubles have prevented me from making the necessary arrangements. Also, Father Francesco strongly counselled delay, *now* I begin to see why; but she took private vows, quite as binding as if registered by the Church, to dedicate herself at the first opportunity. Her convent, as you know, became an object of suspicion to these detested usurpers; the nuns were persecuted

for political reasons, and it was thought better to dissolve the house altogether. Those who had professed, found refuge in other establishments; the novices mostly returned to their own homes. When the sentence of outlawry and confiscation was pronounced against me, at Father Francesco's suggestion I placed Nina with her old nurse, disguised as peasants, in a lonely cottage on the shore. The Priest was to look after them. For some time past I have received from him hints that Nina might serve the great cause better than by devoting her life to Our Lady. These shadows have now taken form. In a letter received from him a few days ago he unfolds his whole plan."

"Ah!" said the listener; "and that is?" —

"This. You have heard of Giacomo Capri?"

The other nodded.

"He is high among the French authorities; he has their confidence; he is on many points their adviser and counsellor. He is governor of their principal prison. I should consider him a traitor"—the Duke frowned heavily—"but that he has given good proof that he loves his country devotedly. Indeed, I believe that he retains his present position because it gives him the power of ameliorating in many ways the sufferings of his un-

fortunate compatriots. But Father Francesco now tells me that there is one thing which he loves still better than his country, and that is—my daughter.”

“What?” exclaimed the listener, starting, “the son of a goldsmith, more than half a Frenchman, what audacity! And you, Duke, speak of it calmly?”

“Compose yourself my good friend. I shall astonish you more yet. I not only speak of it calmly, but the idea pleases and gratifies me.”

The Doctor was speechless.

“Remember,” resumed the Duke, “though a goldsmith’s son, he can boast in his veins some of the best blood of Spain and Italy. Indeed his family is remotely connected with my own. His grandfather was a learned man of your own profession, Doctor. Happily he chanced to cure a wealthy goldsmith of some terrible complaint; given up by all the faculty. The patient was not only rich but grateful. He recompensed the physician magnificently, and moreover adopted his son for his own heir—he was himself a childless man—on the sole condition that the boy should be brought up to his profession. The father wisely consented; the son took kindly to the work, and became not only a proficient, but a master in his craft, which so delighted his patron that he spared no effort to amass for him both

wealth and credit. After his death the young man continued the trade, more as a professor, through the ordeal of whose examination all those must pass who would aspire to any celebrity, than as a means of subsistence. He married a woman of good birth and breeding. This Giacomo is their only child."

The Duke paused, and looked hard at his auditor.

"And why," said the latter, "does the knowledge of his attachment to the young Duchessa please you, Eccellenza? Did you not tell me she was vowed to the veil?"

"Bah!" said the Duke, "what of that? Even were her vows openly taken, a touch from the finger of his Holiness would dissolve the strongest chains that ever bound a nun to her cell. But there is no such necessity; her vows were completely private."

"But they are as binding," suggested the other gravely.

"Not in this case. Nina will see, and conform to, the greater sacrifice required by her country. Her loathing towards everything that wears the badge of the usurper will be the foundation-stone of all this edifice which Father Francesco has raised. The case lies thus: if Giacomo Capri could be induced to betray the trust reposed in him, Naples might be cleared of every Frenchman in a single night. His advice and ex-

ample would act like magic on hundreds who now waver. A second Sicilian Vespers would be the result. I should prefer more open fighting, but we cannot choose. We would seize the French ships in the bay, send them to Sicily for the King and our friends there; fortify ourselves in the town; despatch bodies of troops into the surrounding country; besiege every city occupied by the French—the inhabitants will be only too glad to open their gates to us—the tyrants, surprised and bewildered, will be able to make no head against us; in a few weeks Italy is free; the King returns in triumph; and honour and reward await those who have achieved this great work, be the means what they will."

"And," said the Doctor who had listened attentively, "this is to be brought about by Giacomo Capri's treachery. I begin to understand. And his inducement?"

"Will be my Nina," said the Duke composedly. "Under any other circumstances he might as well hope to win the sun from Heaven as a daughter of the Castellani to be his wife. He may thank a strange combination of events for such unlooked-for happiness."

"And she?" said the Doctor, "will she consent think you?"

"I should not ask her," replied the Duke coldly. "I love my daughter; I would not

give her to any fate likely to displease her. With Giacomo Capri she cannot fail to be happy. He adores her. He is a man of the noblest disposition, in the prime of life, rich and handsome. What more can she require? She knows no one. He is sure to take her fancy."

"And her vows?" persisted the Doctor.

"My good Doctor, are you insane? Of what weight are her vows? Should her conscience be over scrupulous on that matter she shall be thoroughly satisfied. An order in the Pope's own handwriting will command her by her allegiance to the Church to consider her vows null and void. Pius the VII. will gladly sanction the means which settle the triple crown firmly on his head; establish the Church in her rightful authority, and revenge the insults which he has suffered at the hands of this Corsican barbarian. This then is Father Francesco's plan; what do you say to it?"

"Do you entirely approve it, Eccellenza?"

"Entirely? Well, no, perhaps not. I wish it could have been managed without holding out that inducement to Giacomo Capri. Firstly, I know that Nina considers herself vowed to Our Lady—her patroness. Of course under ordinary circumstances any earthly preference on her part would be perjury and sacrilege. She is superstitious and sensitive; in spite of the highest war-

rant to the contrary that idea may cling to her still. Also I think it scarcely fair to tempt Giacomo's fealty with a reward so unhopéd for, and which, even if he revolted from the means, leaves him powerless to resist. It is in a manner taking him at a disadvantage."

"I quite agree," said the Doctor. "And is your Excellency content that your title shall descend to the wife of an Imperial soldier, and the son of a tradesman?"

"Certainly not," replied the Duke, haughtily; "I have other views. When all this is happily arranged, I shall marry again."

"Ah!" his auditor drew a long breath; "I had not thought of that."

"Yes. My daughter will be well dowered—a Castellano should be. Her husband will be enormously rich, and will receive a high command. The names will be united; the goldsmith will disappear altogether. Capri the elder is a man of cultivated mind and polished manners. He has done us good service; we will find him a title."

"And you Duke—pardon—have you considered at all what noble family of Italy shall be honoured by your alliance?"

"I *have* considered," said the Duke with a slight smile. "Some of the Princesses of the House of Bourbon are young and beauti-

ful. The Castellani have more than once quartered their arms with royalty."

The Doctor opened his eyes wide.

"Then your Excellency sanctions the plan?"

"I have not decided; I must reflect upon it. It is a grand idea of the Padre's. Give me your opinion, Doctor."

"My opinion is that it will fail," was the grave reply.

"Fail? How? Why?"

"Giacomo Capri will refuse such terms."

"Refuse? Refuse my daughter whom he adores? Who, but for this, is beyond the reach of his very thoughts?"

"Trust me, Duke, he would refuse Paradise itself on those conditions. I know Giacomo Capri. He might die perhaps in the struggle, but as long as he lives he will be true to his trust."

"You positively think this?" said the Duke.

"I am sure of it," returned his companion.

"Refuse such a reward—a lifetime of happiness and prosperity?"

"Giacomo Capri would refuse an eternity of such, so gained."

The Duke fell into a fit of musing, and remained for some time silent, his head leaning on his hand. He looked up at last, saying—

"I am tired; I will lie down again. See, it is quite day; our scouts will be in soon."

"You will sleep now," said the Doctor. "First take what I have prepared for you."

From somewhere in the background he produced a large silver cup full of liquid, which the patient eagerly emptied. The bandages were once more arranged, the settle readjusted, and the wounded man lay down again, closing his eyes wearily.

After a few minutes of silence he reopened them.

"Doctor."

"I am here, Eccellenza."

"If Giacomo Capri refuses Nina for his wife for these reasons, do you know what I should feel tempted to do?"

"In truth, then, I cannot say."

"No less than give her to him on no terms at all. A man who would sacrifice all his best hopes for conscience sake is worthy of the utmost that earth can give him. He has no superior, scarcely an equal. My child will be well bestowed."

Having said this he turned round, and was soon in a deep sleep. The Doctor looked at him intently.

"What a lofty soul dwells in that body," he muttered. "Would that *he* were our King!"



At that same moment there was heard in the Castellano Palace a clanging of arms and a discordant rattling of bolts and bars. The heavy door of the prison chamber was thrown open and a strong escort entered, to conduct the unhappy Nina to her execution !

CHAPTER IX.

THE Italian summer had waned away, and autumn, quite a different season to that known in more northern latitudes, was silently, almost unconsciously, reigning in its stead.

It was the last day of October, the eve of All Saints, which day may be said in its turn to form the vigil of the very minor Festival of All Souls, if the latter were considered of sufficient importance to possess a vigil, which it does not; though why a day consecrated to the memory of a few human creatures, however excellent, should take precedence of one dedicated to the souls of the entire universe is beyond me to explain.

The sun, already low in the west, shone down upon a large garden, surrounded on all sides by high walls, but in other respects much less stiff and formal than Italian gardens are generally found. Certainly there was the inevitable paved walk, stretching from the furthestmost wall to a flight of broad stone steps which led up to the house; but on each side of it were beds of flowers and little clumps of orange and lemon trees, and many choice shrubs, but all arranged with infinite tidiness and precision, their places appointed with such mathematical

regularity, that apparently they were terrified at the order in which they found themselves kept, and never presumed to grow either higher or wider than the gardener had determined that they should. Among these were interspersed gleaming white statues, ingenious rock-work, and here and there a small fountain, lazily throwing up tiny jets, as if weary of the day's work.

To the right of this orderly plantation stretched away a spacious tract, which looked at first sight as if Nature in her most beautiful luxuriance alone had formed it; but a closer inspection would show that art of the subtlest kind had been at work there.

Through it stretched shady walks, twisting and turning; grassy nooks, where the flowers grew in the wildest profusion and disorder; patches of unmown grass; thickets and shrubberies, groups of immense forest trees; enormous boulders of stone covered with moss; little rivulets rippling over their pebbles and dashing in miniature cascades over rocks most artistically imitating nature, and emptying themselves at last into a broad sheet of water, haunted by aquatic birds of rare and beautiful kinds. Grassy hillocks, surmounted by groups of graceful trees, hid the unsightly wall, and thick evergreens screened off the unmistakably cultivated garden already mentioned. There were caves, and hollow trees, and grassy dells, and secret

paths and portions of positive forest land, where one might really lose one's self if so inclined; and though the space it occupied really was enormous, yet it appeared ten times more so from its careful formation.

A sleeper might wake here and imagine himself in some lonely glade of a tropical forest, so wild, and silent, and beautiful was the whole scene. All the old graceful legends of Greece, all the fables of faun and dryad, nymph and naiad, seemed to take form and substance in the wild arcadian scenery, and the entranced beholder would scarcely be surprised at the apparition of a kirtled and sandalled figure, with full quiver and bended bow, leading a milk-white stag, her golden hair spanned with the shining crescent, proclaiming her both queen and goddess.

And now as the sun sank lower, and a throng of gold and purple clouds sprang up as by magic round him, like gorgeously arrayed courtiers trooping out of the fiery gates of the west to meet their monarch, and one large, pale, star showed itself in the deep blue of the upper heaven, out from the dark wood, down the hill, and over the grassy walks moved a solitary form. Swiftly and silently, indeed, as any nymph or fairy might pass; stopping suddenly on reaching the grassy plain, and coming face to face with the setting sun.

Is it the Genius of Night waking up in the

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depths of the dark wood, and turned at once to stone at sight of the still triumphant God of Day? Truly she wears no crescent, but stars twinkle in the folds of her colourless transparent drapery, and flash and dazzle among the dusky masses of her hair.

She stands silent, with folded arms, gazing at the burning west; almost too fair to be earthborn, yet not possessing the holy beauty of an angel. Verily, like a goddess of the ancient mythology, the embodiment of some Greek sculptor's loveliest dream.

A rustling among the trees and bushes dividing the wilderness from the garden, and the figure, startled from its reverie, turns in that direction a face which once seen can never be forgotten.

It is Nina—more beautiful than the day, with diamonds in her hair, and on her white dress.

The rustling comes nearer, and another figure emerges from among the leaves, and appears on the scene.

Very different this to the first comer. In the new presence all thought of nymph or goddess, naiad or fairy, Greek statue or embodied essence, takes flight at once and utterly. The fresh arrival is a man about thirty-six years of age, tall, broad-shouldered, strong and upright, with a handsome, bronzed face, close shaven, except for a heavy black moustache; keen black eyes, looking straight-

forwardly at everyone with unmistakable honesty, and thick crisp black hair. He is dressed in a French uniform, wears spurs and sword, carries several medals, and has other signs of distinction.

Disdaining the serpentine walk which some thoughtful artist has contrived shall meander among the trees without being seen, he has marched over the flower-beds and through the bushes, making straight for the wilderness.

Nina stretches out her hand with a welcoming smile.

"Ah, Messere Giacomo, how late you are this evening; do you know that in that wood I have walked for nearly an hour."

"*I am* late, *bellessima*. I feared even that I might not come at all. And though here I feel that I ought to have stayed away. But I wanted just an hour of peace, and a glance at all the beautiful things around."

He fixed his eyes on Nina as he spoke, and it required no great discrimination to discover that the beauty he spoke of lived in her face.

"There is something new, then," she said quickly, "revolt—disturbance?"

"No, no, not quite that," he answered, wearily leaning against a tree; "but things are going wrong. What can we expect? The root of it all is wrong. Everything is upside down — jumbled — confused — out of joint — miserable."

"Any news of my father?" asked Nina, anxiously.

"None, signorina; none as far as I have heard. But that is a point I am not likely to be well informed on. Any news of the Duke," he continued, lowering his voice, "would be kept strictly among the French; only by a mere chance should I hear anything."

"And what is disturbing you now, Messere? I see that you are in trouble."

"In trouble! Too true! I am always in trouble. Trouble is rampant everywhere. *We* are not the only sufferers. Where a spirit of injustice and cruelty exists, it will not distinguish friends from foes. I do all I can to remedy the universal grief, but how little it is! Unhappy Naples! Misguided countrymen, if sense and reason could be brought to influence them all this might yet end well."

"And how, Messere?" asked Nina, hotly. "Are we not in bondage—is not Italy a slave?"

"Signorina, I dare not hope to bring you to my way of thinking, but you are so gentle and sensible you will not be angry if I try to show you what I mean. See here. Is not the Emperor a wonderful man? What has he not done? All Europe bows down before him—can we hope to oppose him? No. What then? Must we not submit? Assuredly—but for ever? Again I say no. It is not in the nature of created things for one to keep in subjection millions of his kind,

save for a very short space of time. We shall see. The conquered nations will band themselves together and become conquerors. Even now among the French themselves is disapproval and murmuring. The army in general is devoted to its chief, but secret royalists are to be found even among his choicest troops. What does this tell us? That the spirit of royalty cannot be conquered; it will live, and grow, and sap away the foundation of his throne; and when the time is ripe, and his enemies strong enough, they will rise and he will fall. But meantime, you will say. Well, meantime there is nothing but patience, and a necessary part of patience is submission. Nay, hear me out"—for Nina had flushed with angry crimson. "I do not mean slavish fawning on the hand that strikes us, but patient waiting for better days; doing meanwhile all we can to improve these. Where now is the use of rebellion and revolt day after day? What does it bring? Wounds and imprisonment, death and mourning and misery. Pardon me, signorina, for saying this, knowing as I do, that your noble father heads all these efforts for freedom. But patience for a little while would be a better means. The present state of things cannot last. When the Emperor falls, he falls utterly, and all the nations he has conquered return to their former condition. Of all Europe, one country only, that little island

of England, has the courage and the power to oppose him. Naples has neither. She must wait for circumstances to help her. It is hard—yes; but it will not be for long. See, too, our advantages. It is not the Emperor who becomes our tyrant. He gives us his brother for a King. Joseph is a good man, just and compassionate. He will not make us slaves. He will try to raise us to freedom. He is, moreover, a man of peace; he will incur no unnecessary war, and, I grieve, alas! to say it, but my poor countrymen are not at ease among hissing bullets and cold steel; he will increase trade; he will encourage industry and science; all the skill and knowledge of France will help us; her power and great name will protect us. Ah, signorina, we have found to our cost that we cannot protect ourselves! Under this King, who is wise and merciful, we may become a free, strong nation. And then, in the end, when the Imperial power sets for ever, as it will one day, our rightful monarch will return; our French ruler will withdraw in peace, Heaven forbid that we should affront or injure one who in our need was kind and helpful, and we shall enjoy, without scathe or bloodshed, the blessings of improved laws and increased resources. You smile, beautiful Nina. How good you are to smile! Have I convinced you a little? At least, you will understand why it is that I advocate patience

and submission. Ah, sweet Nina, if I could only make you believe, but that I cannot, that among the French are to be found many noble and devoted men, holding truth and honour above all earthly considerations; many whose hands your own illustrious father might clasp in perfect equality and fellowship. Do not be angry, most beautiful," for Nina had turned her head away, not, as Giacomó fancied, in haughty impatience of this comparison of her father with Frenchmen, but to hide the flush of hope and happiness that overspread her face at the thought of such a friendship. "Had you seen what I have seen, lived as I have, and experienced the true character of these Frenchmen when neither weakened by frivolity nor embruted by cruelty, you would feel as I do—speak as I do."

"But, Ser Giacomo," said Nina, turning her head round again, and showing her sweet face so radiant that Giacomo was in ecstasies at the effects of his own eloquence, "allowing that this were possible—I cannot tell—you put it so undoubtingly—it may be so—allowing that it were, such strange union could not surely be maintained. Think what mixtures of friends and foes, by degrees all united in each other's interests. It would be impossible to keep them separate; and what mistakes, what confusion!"

"Confusion, signora? Why so? Mis-

takes? No, indeed. The mistakes exist now; they would be explained away then. Confusion can only come from mixing two elements antagonistic to each other; the mixture of sympathetic natures causes union, and so it would be. There is nothing antagonistic between French and Italians. Nature has made them near neighbours, and with much the same of disposition and tastes. They would amalgamate at once, each retaining their national characteristics; not as foes and rivals, but as emulous friends."

"But," continued Nina, forcing herself to look straight into Giacomo's face, "there would be yet greater objections. To such union as you contemplate there could be no limit. French and Italians, friends and foes, would be marrying together at last. How is that to be prevented?"

With all her efforts Nina could not conceal the anxiety with which she awaited Giacomo's reply. He saw it, but only took it in the sense of her horror at such a consummation.

"Signorina mia, forgive me for speaking to you in this blunt fashion. There would be no way to prevent it, and happily no necessity for such a way. Consider a moment. When all cause of ill-feeling is removed, who would object to such union? It would be the best bond of alliance between

us. I know that I speak to a daughter of the Castellani, but, believe me, gentilissima, your noble father himself would, if the case were as I have supposed it, advocate the union of his own sons, had he any, with the beautiful and high-born Frenchwomen, who would then gather to the court of the French-Italian king."

This was too much for Nina. She flushed all over with delight, hastening to say by way of explanation —

"Truly, messere, you draw so bright a picture of our poor Naples under French rule, that I find myself forgetting my national enmity, and wishing that matters were, in fact, as you fancy them. But my father—oh, no, never; others might, but he could never be induced to forego his hatred and revenge towards the French."

"He would, sweet Nina, he would, could he but once see the advantages of what I urge; could that be done, and could we prevail on him to resign the hopeless task of righting Naples by the strong hand, he then, living unmolested, and observing all that passes around, would judge for himself of the truth of what I say. He would be forced into contact with the French—ah, signorina, again I repeat it, there are noble and gifted men among them, whom he could not fail to appreciate—he would see them striving to redeem this beautiful, desolate

Italy; to ameliorate her laws, advance her commerce, raise her people; could he refuse to join in this grand work? Rather could he prevail on himself to stand aside and see others labour, and not march to the front and take his rightful place as chief and leader in every great effort? He would do it, believe me, he would; it is only changing one form of action for another. Could he only be persuaded! True, Naples now lies in ashes, but in those ashes dwells the living germ, and from them she shall rise again, a Phoenix younger and more beautiful than before, and commence another glorious existence. But, like the Phoenix, she must purge away with fire all that is old, and weak, and useless; till the former life is utterly destroyed, the new being cannot enter. So it is. Did it rest with me, it would be already done!"

Giacomo ceased speaking abruptly. They had been slowly walking up and down the grassy plain where Nina had stood watching the sunset; she now paused beside a fountain built to look like a spring bubbling through the solid rock, and leaning her arms on a stone cross which surmounted it, looked steadily in her companion's face.

She had conquered the wild agitation which the subject they were discussing had at first caused her, and now carried it on with a secret and determined object in view.

"You forget, Messere Giacomo," she said with assumed coldness. "that all these brilliant pictures are not, and never can be, more real than the Fata Morgana, which we see at sunrise yonder in the bay; solid and beautiful afar off—approach, and you find it only coloured vapour. My father is an exile, his name attainted, his lands confiscated, a price set upon his head. Many others the same. By what magic do you propose to bring them back, to live in peace and plenty unmolested among the French rulers?"

"By a magic, signora, which surely exists, and before long will make itself felt. The magic of general pardon and reconciliation."

Nina opened wide her lustrous eyes.

"I tell you the truth, most beautiful. It is not as yet known, but I hear the results of the French councils, and I impart to you what I would not to any other living. The King is determined that his new subjects shall not be destroyed, or hurt, or grieved, if he can prevent it. A general amnesty is in preparation, and all who will cease open hostility, are included therein. I know, too, though this will not be set down in express terms, that all who can be depended on to keep their word, will be restored to whatever rank, station, or privileges they before enjoyed; their possessions returned to them, their grievances repaired, their well-being in

all things considered. It is a generous and kingly act, and the precursor, I feel sure, of many more such. If, signorina, your gallant father would only lay down his arms, and take advantage of this act, he might, before a month was over, return with all his retainers to his own palace, there resume his rank and state, and become, if he so pleased, the friend and adviser of King Joseph, and the powerful benefactor of his country at the same time. Say then, signorina, is not this better than the life he now leads? Look around at the French power. Can we hope to oppose it? If it is to fall, it will fall from abuse of itself and the will of Heaven, not our doing. Is it any disgrace to accept peace when war becomes hopeless? King Ferdinand himself would never counsel useless bloodshed. Ah! signorina, most wise and gentle, I see that you listen, you believe; you have hope in this my wish, my effort. Will you not help? Of what mighty avail would not your persuasive words be with the noble Duke? Ah! say then, you will aid me, you will try, you will speak?"

In truth Nina was listening with her whole soul looking out of her eager eyes, as Giacomo laid open his plan, so wonderfully adapted to her wish and need. The gloomy curtain which hid her future seemed to rise as he spoke, and roll away, showing immeasurable sunny landscapes beyond.

If this *could* be done! What an opening for a complete and recognised friendship with Claud and his generous companions. Her father would know them all. Would he not select *them* especially for his friends. So like himself, so brave and unselfish. They *must* meet, they could not fail to agree; and then, and then —

Her own already waning prejudices against the French had been finally swept away the night of her miraculous escape from the prison. She would have resorted to any means, spared no pains to bring her father and the Priest to her own altered views. She had pondered constantly on the perplexing subject, and never found one feasible or possible means to such an end.

She had carefully concealed from her host and his family her wonderful adventures of that night.

Recognised at once by the goldsmith himself when he admitted her and received with a perfect furore of joyful welcome, she had found it easy to account for her late arrival, and every other incongruous circumstance attending her appearance.

“She had been frightened,” she said, “on the road, after leaving the Priest’s house; she had lost the letter, but remembered the address; she had got into wrong streets, and parts of the city she was utterly unacquainted with; at one time she was close to a ceme-

tery, at another she had taken refuge in a church."

She argued with herself that all this was true, which it was, as far as it went; and she purposely made her whole tale vague and uncertain, that nothing should ever afterwards be brought as proof against her.

Her very first act on stepping over the threshold, had been to divest herself of the burnous; and wrapping it together so that its shape or make would not be noticed, spoke of it as the monk's gown which the Priest had given her. The vivandière's dress which she wore, so nearly resembled that of a Campagna peasant, as to be easily mistaken for it, especially by people only half awake and utterly bewildered; and the thoughtful kindness of Madama Capri, who yielded to their unexpected guest's entreaty to be allowed to lie down and sleep at once, no matter where, prevented any examination or discussion of her appearance there. Conducted at once to the chamber of honour, always kept ready for guests of distinction, Nina contrived in spite of her deadly weariness, to secure everything she had worn under lock and key, before she allowed an eyelid to close, feeling very uncertain when once she lay down on the gorgeous bed that waited to receive her, how soon she might rise from it again. And her presentiment was true. For five days she lay between life

and death, in a frightful state of prostration and fever, the natural reaction of the strain on both mind and body, which had been drawn so tightly for the last twenty-four hours. She entreated that no physician might be summoned, fearing some possible recognition; to this her hosts unwillingly consented, and Madama Capri, herself better skilled in medicine than half the professors in Naples, indemnified herself by a course of watching and nursing that would have been a credit to Saint Catharine.

Indeed it would have been an immense pleasure to the excellent lady, could she have succeeded in tiring or incommoding herself in that labour of love; but in the plentiful and well-ordered *ménage* of the Capri, such a result was simply impossible.

The highly honoured female, who had tended Giacomo's infant years, still held her post, and exercised an absolute but gracious sway over the whole household. Under her competent management, the services required for the best chamber containing the mysteriously beautiful guest, merely enjoined a slight rearrangement of the domestic duties, and were performed to such perfection that the anxious mistress could suggest no improvement. She solaced herself, therefore, by gathering daily the loveliest flowers that the garden and grounds afforded, to adorn Nina's chamber, and sitting hours long by

her bedside, armed with an enormous green fan, scaring away, or devoting to swift destruction, flies, mosquitoes, and any other winged insect whose unhappy fate brought it within those jealously guarded precincts.

The one great wish of Madama Capri's life had been to possess a daughter; a wish that had never been realized; and now with great joy her whole heart went out to meet the forlorn young creature, so wonderfully fair, and so utterly friendless, who came in such strange guise to ask shelter and protection.

While Nina still lay in the darkened chamber, her strong young life and healthy frame battling with fever and exhaustion, unexpectedly arrived Margherita, bearing a letter from Father Francesco to the goldsmith, detailing more fully all that he had glanced at, in the note entrusted to Nina, and which he had the sagacity to foresee she might possibly lose on the way, though far from suspecting into what hands it would fall.

Margherita's account of herself was simple enough. After safely bestowing her charge in the concealed cave, she sped away to a refuge that she knew of close by, but found when she reached the path leading to it that it was guarded by some of the Frenchmen, being an unmistakable outlet from the back of the cottage. She turned before they saw

her, and ran noiselessly in another direction ; but this took her far out of her way, and through unknown paths and roads before she could find a safe concealment.

She succeeded at last, and crouched among some rocks, till daylight and the reawaking world gave her courage to emerge and return. But she found herself in an unknown solitude, utterly ignorant which way to set her face homeward. Finally she fixed on a path which took her quite in an opposite direction, walked for hours, and when the sun was high discovered that she was miles from home, fainting with fatigue and hunger, and without a farthing of money.

She came at last to a village, and cautiously telling part of her tale to some men at work, they housed her till evening, then harnessed a light cart and took her back.

She had been tormented enough through the day thinking what her darling would do without her ; but when she found the state the house was in, and no sign of Nina, her consternation and terror almost deprived her of reason. Utterly worn out, she was obliged to rest that night, but when morning dawned set off to the Priest with her disastrous tale.

There, to her great relief, she found matters not so bad as she feared ; and being assured by Father Francesco that Nina was in safe keeping, returned to the cottage,

arranged matters there, and then went on to attend her young mistress in her new abode.

Could that closely-locked receptacle where Nina had deposited her vivandière dress and burnous have given up its contents, not a little surprised would all the members of that household have been. But she had foreseen this, and the key was safely hidden under her pillow, and the locked box, known to contain the dress she had worn on arriving, was pushed away to make room for the pieces of furniture, and forgotten.

Once, indeed, while Nina lay helpless and half-conscious, Margherita had proposed to open this box and see if it contained anything of consequence. To this Madama Capri dissented.

"It is evident," she said, "that the young Duchessa wished that box to remain unopened; so it shall, therefore, till she herself proposes to open it."

So the box was thrust away, and no one thought of it again; and when Nina rose from her sick bed, a new wardrobe befitting her station awaited her, prepared by the united care of her hostess and Margherita. She contented herself with ascertaining that the box was intact, and her secret unsuspected; and so calmly awaited a convenient opportunity of destroying the witness of that terrible night's adventure.

Once recovered from the exhaustion that

overcame her, and its attendant fever, Nina was soon perfectly well, and no one wondered that such a fright as she had undergone in the cottage, and followed up by twenty-four hours more of fatigue and anxiety, should have produced the result that they witnessed.

She recovered, however, thoroughly, and at once assumed a significant and important place in the household.

Her beautiful face, joined to a fine intellect and sweet temper, raised a feeling little short of adoration in the goldsmith and his wife ; and when Giacomo, that pearl of sons, arrived on one of his periodical visits, he found a new and most delightful addition to the family circle. He was well acquainted with Nina already ; for Father Francesco, partly for convenience, partly, perhaps, for the furtherance of his newly-concocted plan, had already employed him in numerous commissions for the inmates of the cottage, where his active and ingenious kindness seemed to find a means of alleviating every privation and indignity that they were forced to undergo.

Nina had begun to hail his appearance with joy. He brought them news from the outer world, the only news they had ; sometimes tidings of her father ; political information concerning the French ; and whenever he came, a hopeful, cheery influence seemed to enter with him.

And he—I think I need scarcely say what these frequent visits brought upon him. Giacomo had lived to the age of thirty-six years, and had never found any one woman who came up to the standard which he had unconsciously proposed to himself as his ideal of what a woman should be.

In his early youth he had had small fancies, but they soon died out either from discovering too quickly that his idols had brazen hands and feet of clay, or worse still, were formed of base metal altogether. He wanted gold all through; and, that found, could forgive any amount of flaws in the workmanship. He did find it at last—solid gold, double-refined, and, as far as he had seen, not a flaw at all. But he was so attracted and fascinated that he gave in at once, without waiting to seek for flaws; concluding, from former experience, that did they exist he must have discovered them. He yielded entirely to the new sensation, and shutting his eyes to the future, lived only in the present; and his life was little more than a delirious dream.

Even Nina's incomparable beauty scarcely accounted for the perfect victory she gained over his understanding, the complete slavery with which his very thoughts bowed down to her, for he had seen unmoved the loveliest women of many countries.

Perhaps it was that she was altogether

different to all of them. Calm, but not cold, dreamy, but not sentimental; even in the poor circumstances where he first found her, her rich nature came out and glorified all the mean surroundings. Like the unhappy king of fabulous history, everything she touched turned to gold, and, like him, that miraculous power became her bane ; for the realities of life ceased to nourish her, and she fed upon shadows. But Giacomo did not see this. He only saw a creature more beautiful and glorious than he had ever dreamed of coming down from her royal height, talking to him with an angel's voice, giving him soft looks out of her starry eyes ; and his delirium increased. When he found this goddess located in his father's house, on equal and intimate terms, he said, "This is strange and wonderful; the finger of fate is in this," and the delirium went on.

How delicious was that time ! Giacomo's visits, of necessity few and short hitherto, became so frequent and lengthened that it was marvellous how he found time for the duties of his post. Early in the morning, before the sun was visible above the sea, he contrived to make his way to the Piazza d'Oro, and there in the wilderness where we but now left them walking, he was almost sure of finding the fair daughter of the Castellano.

This wilderness was a plan of Giacomo's

own for putting into use a large tract of waste ground which his father had purchased merely because it joined the house, and any buildings erected thereon would have overlooked his entire domain, a possibility for many reasons to be avoided ; and Giacomo, intensely fond of nature, and weary of the stiffness and formality of Italian gardens, finding he could do but little to modify his mother's love of mathematical flower-beds, easily obtained his father's consent to arrange this waste land in any way he chose.

The result was what I have described, and the elder Capris were wonderfully pleased with the effect of the miniature scenery and their son's ingenious invention. Madama called it *magnifico ; grandioso* ; but petitioned that it might be carefully hidden from view of the house, as being so completely *senza regola* it might interfere with the proportions of her trim flower-garden. The goldsmith pronounced it "*un vero trionfo*" and most convenient for smoking an evening cigar. Giacomo himself during his flying visits had only time to take a superficial glance, and see that his directions were being properly carried out ; so that as madama preferred strolling up and down her neat-paved walk, and the goldsmith's evening cigar was generally enjoyed at the window of his own snuggerly, the beautiful wilderness was positively wasting its sweetness upon its own desert air. But when

Nina arrived all this was changed. The first time that she was strong enough to walk that far, she insisted on penetrating the hedge of evergreens that bounded the garden, and her delighted astonishment at the scene in which she found herself was the most delicious reward that Giacomo could possibly have had for all his thought and trouble. From that moment the wilderness became her favourite haunt. Early in the morning and late at night she wandered within its ample precincts, exploring, scrutinising and admiring; and thither in a very short time it became Giacomo's custom to betake himself the moment that he arrived in the Piazza d'Oro.

They became better acquainted, and grew greater friends every day. Nina began to listen with increasing interest to Giacomo's account of his own outer life, the different phases of his duty, the scenes he witnessed, the continual discomfort and constant risings of the people; also, and on this subject he was more eloquent than on any other, his fervent wish that the two nations could be combined, and the fret and vexation cease for ever.

And Nina, whom he had known bitter as death, unbending as iron, in her hatred to the national enemy, began to listen, at first silently, then with interest, and at last with unmistakable concurrence in his view of the question. What had changed her? he asked.

And Giacomo trembled with joy, and his delirium went on.

By degrees Nina began to watch for his appearance from an ingenious post of observation which she had constituted her own, a niche in an old wall which commanded an angle of the Toledo, and which she one day showed him in great glee at her own genius for discovery. She added, moreover —

“I thought you would never come, and I heard the Padrona say there had been some cruel work in the town, some Frenchmen punished or imprisoned, or something, for helping some Italians, and so I thought” — stammering and hesitating, “that though the French were not like our own people, yet if they were helping us, I was sorry for them, and” — stammering still more, while hot crimson rushed all over her face — “and perhaps they were friends of yours, for you say that you know so many good men among them, and possibly it might bring you into trouble, and you were so late, and I wanted to know what it all was, and I got anxious, and I watched for you, and I hope they are not your friends, and what is it that they did? — and — and” —

Nina had got herself into such a puzzle of words and reasons, that anyone less apt would have blundered hopelessly on, and come to a dead stop at last ; but she, easy and graceful even in the most perplexing position, after a

moment's pause continued with a silvery laugh —

“And so that is why I ran all the way to meet you,” which she had done, filling Giacomo with amazement and rapture, “and I was so glad to see you looking as if nothing had happened, that I forgot, and let out the secret of my little watch tower, and how I look for you from there every evening.”

Was this likely to lessen Giacomo's delirium? Hardly. How little he guessed that her lively—or rather deadly—interest in these Frenchmen was the sole cause of her apparent inclination for himself. That her beautiful changing colour, agitated manner, and drooping eyes, were simply the result of an ever present fear that either through herself or some other her secret might be on the verge of discovery.

Nina never dreamed of the wild work she was making in Giacomo's honest heart. To her he was almost an elderly man. A friend of Father Francesco, and a fit companion for her own parent; but she never would have supposed him anyone's lover, least of all her own. Always a kind friend and pleasant companion, and at the present time a most useful ally.

Since her arrival in the Piazza d'Oro, she had never received the smallest tidings of Claud or his friends. She knew the difficulty of communication, and their courageous

devotion during the night of her escape had banished for ever all fear of neglect or indifference, yet, as the time went on, she grew not a little anxious, more for them than herself, lest some trouble had fallen upon them.

On rare occasions she went out, closely veiled, with Madama Capri, but so great was her fear of recognition that nothing could induce her to lift for a moment the heavy lace that hid her features. Innocent madama, little knowing the cause of her terror, would try to combat this resolution.

"Dear signora," Nina would say, "are we not all outlawed? Suppose I should be recognised?"

"But, sweet one," madama would reply, "what interest would any creature have in persecuting such an innocent dove as thou? Truly none Italian born, and as for the French not one of them has ever seen thy face."

But Nina remembered with terrible distinctness the hours she had stood before the assembled French officers, and felt that every line and turn of her countenance must be known to them; that even the soldiers who escorted her to prison had all stared at her with curious scrutiny; that the Officer of the Guard would doubtless to that moment be employed searching in

every face for a resemblance to his escaped prisoner; and, shuddering, she drew her veil more determinately down, and none of madama's arguments could induce her to raise it.

This was disappointing to the good lady, for nothing would have pleased her better than to parade her beautiful charge through the Toledo and on the Chiaia day after day, and glory in the admiration she would excite; yet when in her vexation she appealed to her husband the goldsmith decided against her.

"The child is right," he said. "She knows well enough, though she is not vain enough to say it, that such a face as hers would attract every idle Frenchman in the city. They would watch her home, and we should be pestered with enquiries and *billets-doux*, and perhaps the Cavalieri themselves popping over the wall, or at any rate twanging their nonsensical guitars and singing their foolery under the windows. And beyond the annoyance they might do still greater harm. She would be known at last, and serious injury might result therefrom to the Duke himself. No, no, let the young thing do what she will; she is as wise as she is beautiful; depend upon it her plan is the right one."

And much dispirited, madama was forced to yield.

Nina, however, kept her eyes open, and during her veiled expeditions searched eagerly among the passers-by for any of the faces that she knew. Neither Claud nor Chevelure ever appeared, but once she saw Brandenburg.

A small party of soldiers came marching down the street, and in the midst of them she recognised the unmistakable broad, comical face, associated in her mind with so much good-natured blundering on her behalf.

But either lamplight and daylight had a different effect upon his appearance, or there was some other reason, for he certainly seemed very much altered.

There was something anxious, almost stern in his expression. He walked with folded arms, an empty sword belt dangling beside him; and though it was natural to suppose that he was in command of the party, yet even to Nina's unsophisticated eyes, it looked very much as if the party were in command of him.

At sight of one who brought such terrible recollections to her mind Nina became so frightfully agitated that she almost fell upon the pavement, and madama hastily calling a calesso, conveyed her home in a fainting state, the cause of which she could not in the least understand.

Giacomo's connection with and interest in the French was a priceless boon to Nina:

Through him she gleaned something of the news of the day; he was well acquainted with all that took place in the city, and, seeing her growing interest, was careful to relate every circumstance, even the most trifling, that came within his knowledge; and knowing this she felt sure that nothing of her own adventure had ever transpired, or it would certainly have come to his ears; and by the same reasoning, no suspicion could have fallen upon her deliverers or the consequences would inevitably be made known to him.

When, however, she heard of some French officers being imprisoned for helping some Italians, she was almost crazed with anxiety, till Giacomo set her mind at rest by saying that the culprits were two very young subalterns—mere boys—who had provoked a row with the townspeople by conniving at the escape of some thieving lazzaroni; that the King was so incensed at the whole affair that he had placed the offenders in arrest for a week, threatening the loss of their commissions if they were ever found engaged in anything of the kind again.

Nina was satisfied, and never for a moment suspected what curious speculations her anxiety had raised in Giacomo's mind. Absorbed in her own thoughts and plans, she had no observation to spare for others;

while he, at the same time, never doubted that she was fully aware of his feelings, for it seemed to him as natural that worship should follow her, as that light should fall where the sun shone.

The elders looked on and said nothing. Madama took care that no one should obstruct Nina's visits to the wilderness, and carefully abstained from reminding Giacomo that his parents saw but little of him, notwithstanding his frequent arrivals in the Piazza d'Oro.

The goldsmith presided in his magnificent warehouse, and overlooked his apprentices, and kept a sharp eye upon his workmen, and now and then employed his own skilful fingers in the manufacture of some exquisite design in jewellery, which he would bring home and exhibit to his wife and son, saying that "It was too good to put in a shop window for some rich merchant's daughter to buy and spoil with the back ground of her sallow skin," that "in all Naples there was only one fit to wear it, and that was the little angel out yonder," pointing to the wilderness; and would then put it into Giacomo's hand saying, "Give it her, my son, I am too old to coin soft words, but tell her not to put it near her lips, for though the best of rubies, it would make but a poor show there;" and Giacomo would take it and entreat beautiful Nina

to make it of some worth by touching it; and Nina, with true feminine love of pretty things and pretty speeches, would thank him in the sweetest of voices and with the brightest of smiles, and would put it into her hair, or on her dress in the most becoming way possible, and would come in looking unutterably lovely and show her trinket to Madama Capri, and ask if she had ever seen anything to equal it; and madama, with eyes running over with joy, would say: "Well, yes, she *had* seen something far more beautiful," and Nina would catch Giacomo's eye and laugh merrily, but colour up too; and Giacomo's delirium went on, and grew stronger every day.

END OF VOL. I.

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